

UNCLASSIFIED

AD NUMBER

ADC011408

CLASSIFICATION CHANGES

TO: **unclassified**

FROM: **secret**

LIMITATION CHANGES

TO:
Approved for public release, distribution unlimited

FROM:
Distribution authorized to U.S. Gov't. agencies only; Proprietary Info.; 20 Sep 1977. Other requests shall be referred to US Army Command and General Staff College, Fort Leavenworth, KS 66027.

AUTHORITY

Adjutant General's Office [Army] ltr, 29 Jan 1981; Adjutant General's Office [Army] ltr, 29 Jan 1981

THIS PAGE IS UNCLASSIFIED

SECRET

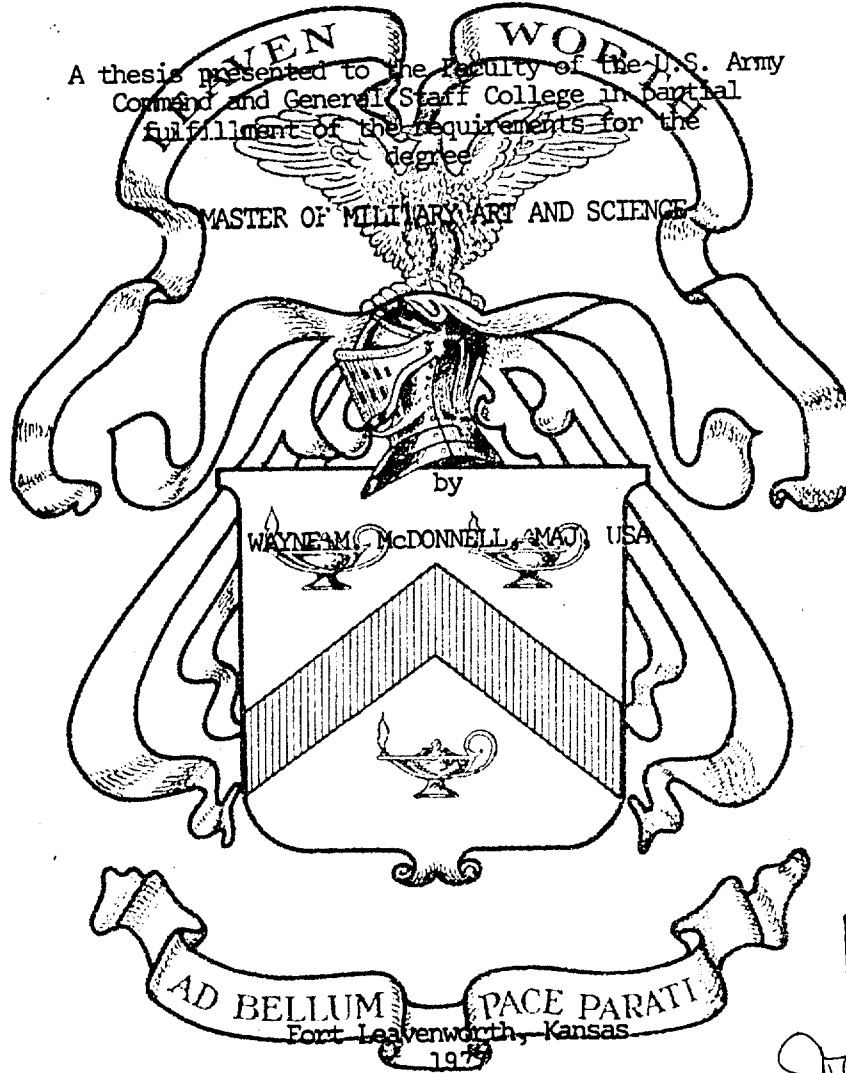
2

THE NVA IN LAOS: 1951-73(U)

ADC011408

A thesis presented to the Faculty of the U.S. Army
Command and General Staff College in partial
fulfillment of the requirements for the
degree

MASTER OF MILITARY ART AND SCIENCE



D D C

RECEIVED
SEP 20 1977
B

CGSC 477-133

Repro CGSC Copy Nr 6 of 10 Copies, Serial 4

CLASSIFIED BY DIA
Exempt from General Declassification
Schedule of Executive Order 11652
Exemption Category 2
Declassify On Notification by
originator

SECRET

RECEIVED **UNCLASSIFIED**
WHEN SEPARATED FROM
CLASSIFIED INCLOSURES

SECRET

| REPORT DOCUMENTATION PAGE | | READ INSTRUCTIONS BEFORE COMPLETING FORM |
|--|-----------------------|---|
| 1. REPORT NUMBER | 2. GOVT ACCESSION NO. | 3. RECIPIENT'S CATALOG NUMBER |
| 4. TITLE (and Subtitle) The NVA in Laos: 1951-73 | | 5. TYPE OF REPORT & PERIOD COVERED Final Report 9 Jun 77 |
| | | 6. PERFORMING ORG. REPORT NUMBER |
| 7. AUTHOR(s) Major Wayne M. McDonnell, MI | | 8. CONTRACT OR GRANT NUMBER(s) |
| 9. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION NAME AND ADDRESS Student at the U.S. Army Command and General Staff College, Fort Leavenworth, Kansas 66027 | | 10. PROGRAM ELEMENT, PROJECT, TASK AREA & WORK UNIT NUMBER |
| 11. CONTROLLING OFFICE NAME AND ADDRESS U.S. Army Command and General Staff College ATTN: ATSW-SE | | 12. REPORT DATE 9 Jun 77 |
| | | 13. NUMBER OF PAGES 105 |
| 14. MONITORING AGENCY NAME & ADDRESS (if different from Controlling Office) | | 15. SECURITY CLASS. (of this report) SECRET |
| | | 15a. DECLASSIFICATION/DOWNGRADING SCHEDULE |
| 16. DISTRIBUTION STATEMENT (of this Report) Distribution limited to U.S. Government agencies only: Proprietary Information Other requests for this document must be referred to U.S. Army Command and General Staff College, Fort Leavenworth, Kansas 66027 20 SEP 1977 | | |
| 17. DISTRIBUTION STATEMENT (of the abstract entered in Block 20, if different from Report) Abstract unclassified. Approved for public release; distribution unlimited. | | |
| 18. SUPPLEMENTARY NOTES Master of Military Art and Science (MMAS) Thesis prepared at CGSC in partial fulfillment of the Master's Program requirements, U.S. Army Command and General Staff College, Fort Leavenworth, Kansas 66027 | | |
| 19. KEY WORDS (Continue on reverse side if necessary and identify by block number) | | |
| 20. ABSTRACT (Continue on reverse side if necessary and identify by block number) See reverse. | | |

SECRET

Unclassified

SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF THIS PAGE(When Data Entered)

~~SECRET~~

(U) Laos was designed to be a buffer state between Thailand and North Vietnam. The North Vietnamese, however, were determined to influence if not actually control events in the country. In response, the United States and Thailand backed various right-wing elements and selected tribal groups (principally the Meo) to frustrate North Vietnamese designs and to establish Western centers of influence where feasible. (U)

(U) Though initially constrained by weather and poor roads, the North Vietnamese Army (NVA) began a pattern of ebb and flow, expanding military activity in Laos in response to political setbacks in Vientiane, pulling back when their clients, the Pathet Lao, did well. Gradually, the NVA policy evolved from one of bolstering the position of their buffer allies to one of maintaining total domination over large areas of Laos to protect the Ho Chi Minh Trail. Thus, from 1965 onward, the North Vietnamese viewed Laos not only as a buffer but as the corridor through which their lifeline to the south must pass. Eventually, Laos became one more battlefield in the Indochina War as the NVA launched multi-division operations while the United States flew up to 700 sorties per day in Laos, and Thai infantry and artillery battalions assisted the CIA-supported Meo Irregulars and the Royal Lao Army. (U)

(U) Following collapse of the French military position in Indochina in 1954, the level of military activity in Laos remained low until the end of Prime Minister Souvanna Phouma's coalition government in 1958. The United States encouraged right-wing reaction in the wake of Pathet Lao electoral gains followed by the neutralist coup of Kong Le left the Lao political scene fragmented in Rightist, Neutralist, and Pathet Lao factions. When it became apparent that the right-wing forces under Phoumi Nosavan would never prevail, U.S. policy shifted behind Souvanna Phouma's neutralist position and, in the wake of the Geneva Convention, another coalition government was formed. However, polarization again ensued in early 1963 when the CIA organized a Meo offensive which hill-hopped to within 15 kilometers of Sam Neua City and Pathet Lao forces, with NVA backing, attempted to drive Kong Le's neutralist forces from the Plain of Jars. The CIA responded to Kong Le's plight by ordering Vang Pao's Meo to support his forces. The NVA then reacted with a series of Dry Season offensives to clear the Meo positions from the dominating terrain along Route 6, leading to the Plain of Jars. By 1969, the NVA had achieved their objective and had improved their lines of communication to a point where they were subsequently able to contest Vang Pao for the Plain with multi-division offensives by 1970-71. By 1973, the Meo had lost the Plain of Jars and had only one remaining major base at Long Tieng. Finally, in Central and South Laos, NVA concern about the eastern flank of the Ho Chi Minh Trail caused steady escalation from 1965 onward until, by the early 1970's, the NVA conducted brigade-size operations in Central Laos and division-size operations in South Laos (on the Bolovens Plateau). (U)

| | |
|---------------------------------|--|
| ACCESSION for | |
| RTIS | White Section <input type="checkbox"/> |
| BDC | Buff Section <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> |
| UNANNOUNCED | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| JUSTIFICATION | |
| BY | |
| DISTRIBUTION/AVAILABILITY CODES | |
| Dist. | AVAIL. Code / or SPECIAL |
| B | |

(This page is unclassified)

~~SECRET~~

SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF THIS PAGE(When Data Entered)

SECRET

MASTER OF MILITARY ART AND SCIENCE

THESIS APPROVAL PAGE

Name of candidate WAYNE M. McDONNELL

Title of thesis The NVA in Laos: 1951-73(U)

Approved by:

Ralph H. Brenner, Chairman

Jay M. Newman, Member, Graduate Research Faculty

Sidney Klein, Member, Consulting Faculty

Accepted this 22nd day of April 1977 by [Signature]
Director, Master of Military Art and Science.

"NATIONAL SECURITY INFORMATION"

"Unauthorized Disclosure Subject to Criminal
Sanctions"

The opinions and conclusions expressed herein are those of the individual student author and do not necessarily represent the views of either the U.S. Army Command and General Staff College or any other governmental agency. (References to this study should include the foregoing statement.)

DDC
RECEIVED
SEP 20 1977
RECEIVED

B

CLASSIFIED BY DIA
EXEMPT FROM GENERAL DECLASSIFICATION
SCHEDULE OF EXECUTIVE ORDER 11652
EXEMPTION CATEGORY 2
DECLASSIFY ON Notification
By originator

ii

SECRET

Regraded UNCLASSIFIED
when separated from
classified documents

037 266

UNCLASSIFIED

ABSTRACT

Laos was designed to be a buffer state between Thailand and North Vietnam. The North Vietnamese, however, were determined to influence if not actually control events in the country. In response, the United States and Thailand backed various right-wing elements and selected tribal groups (principally the Meo) to frustrate North Vietnamese designs and to establish Western centers of influence where feasible.

Though initially constrained by weather and poor roads, the North Vietnamese Army (NVA) began a pattern of ebb and flow, expanding military activity in Laos in response to political setbacks in Vientiane, pulling back when their clients, the Pathet Lao, did well. Gradually, the NVA policy evolved from one of bolstering the position of their buffer allies to one of maintaining total domination over large areas of Laos to protect the Ho Chi Minh Trail. Thus, from 1965 onward, the North Vietnamese viewed Laos not only as a buffer but as the corridor through which their lifeline to the south must pass. Eventually, Laos became one more battlefield in the Indochina War as the NVA launched multi-division operations while the United States flew up to 700 sorties per day in Laos, and Thai infantry and artillery battalions assisted the CIA-supported Meo Irregulars and the Royal Lao Army.

Following collapse of the French military position in Indochina in 1954, the level of military activity in Laos remained low until the end of Prime Minister Souvanna Phouma's coalition government in 1958. The United States encouraged right-wing reaction in the wake of Pathet Lao electoral gains followed by the neutralist coup of Kong Le left the Lao

UNCLASSIFIED

political scene fragmented in Rightist, Neutralist, and Pathet Lao factions. When it became apparent that the right-wing forces under Phoumi Nosavan would never prevail, U.S. policy shifted behind Souvanna Phouma's neutralist position and, in the wake of the Geneva Convention, another coalition government was formed. However, polarization again ensued in early 1963 when the CIA organized a Meo offensive which hill-hopped to within 15 kilometers of Sam Neua City and Pathet Lao forces, with NVA backing, attempted to drive Kong Le's neutralist forces from the Plain of Jars. The CIA responded to Kong Le's plight by ordering Vang Pao's Meo to support his forces. The NVA then reacted with a series of Dry Season offensives to clear the Meo positions from the dominating terrain along Route 6, leading to the Plain of Jars. By 1969, the NVA had achieved their objective and had improved their lines of communication to a point where they were subsequently able to contest Vang Pao for the Plain with multi-division offensives by 1970-71. By 1973, the Meo had lost the Plain of Jars and had only one remaining major base at Long Tieng. Finally, in Central and South Laos, NVA concern about the eastern flank of the Ho Chi Minh Trail caused steady escalation from 1965 onward until, by the early 1970's, the NVA conducted brigade-size operations in Central Laos and division-size operations in South Laos (on the Bolovens Plateau).

UNCLASSIFIED

RESEARCH NOTES

This paper is heavily dependent on four lengthy studies written by the author in 1974 during a tour of duty in Laos with Project 404, Defense Attache Office, Vientiane. The studies were based on extensive holdings of intelligence materials originating from a variety of sources. A significant portion of the material was either unpublished or, for reasons of classification, enjoyed only limited circulation. Since the files concerned were destroyed upon evacuation of Project 404 personnel, some of the original source material probably no longer exists. Additionally, knowledgeable personnel, particularly those with extended periods of service in Laos, were interviewed in detail to supplement documentary materials available. The studies were end-noted and supplemental commentaries concerning origin of various source materials were included. The titles of the studies, which are reflected below, give an indication of the rather extensive coverage possible when the reports are considered together. They are: (1) NVA Participation in the War for North Laos: 1955-1973(U), (2) NVA Participation in the War for South Laos: 1962-1973(U), (3) The Last Six Months of the 1972-1973 Plaine Des Jarres Campaign(U), and (4) The NVA 1972-1973 Bolovens Campaign(U). For background material, the Rand Corporation studies of Zasloff, Langer and Blaufarb (the work of the first two authors being available in book form), McCoy's The Politics of Heroin in Southeast Asia, and Dommen's Laos: The Politics of Neutralization were used.

UNCLASSIFIED

Where appropriate, endnotes for this study contain background data concerning original source material used, particularly as regards material drawn from the five intelligence studies cited above.

I have also drawn on my experiences gained from a year of studying the Lao language and culture at Foreign Service Institute, Department of State, Washington, D.C., and the tour of duty in Laos referred to above.

I have endnoted following whole paragraphs rather than individual lines whenever material in a single paragraph was derived from the same source. Finally, although it has been necessary for reasons of accuracy to use phrases or entire sentences from the intelligence reports which I authored, I have not placed my own words in quotation marks.

UNCLASSIFIED

CHRONOLOGY OF EVENTS

December 1950

US enters into Mutual Defense Assistance Agreement with France, Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos. Agreement includes provision for indirect American military aid.

1951

Four Viet Minh battalions move into Laos to recruit and train Pathet Lao forces.

February 1951

Indochinese Communist Party reorganized and renamed, Lao Dong Party of Vietnam (Vietnamese Workers' Party); Lao and Cambodian observers are present.

Winter 1952-1953

Viet Minh forces infiltrate Laos in preparation for countrywide spring offensive.

March-April 1953

Viet Minh forces invade Laos; Sam Neua City falls and Pathet Lao establish headquarters there.

May 1953

Viet Minh forces advance in North, Central, and South Laos.

End 1953

Viet Minh overrun Thakhek, then retreat into hills after French reinforcements arrive.

UNCLASSIFIED

March-May 1954

Battle of Dien Bien Phu.

July 1954

Geneva Conference; Phong Saly and Houa Phan (then called Sam Neua) provinces designated as Pathet Lao regroupment areas.

19 November 1954

French and Viet Minh complete withdrawal of forces; Pathet Lao regroup in Phong Saly and Houa Phan (Sam Neua).

22 March 1955

Phak Pasason Lao (People's Party of Laos) established.

6 January 1956

Neo Lao Issara change name to Neo Lao Hak Sat (Lao Patriotic Front); 47-man Central Committee set up with Prince Souphanouvong as head.

March 1956

Souvanna Phouma becomes Prime Minister of Laos.

12 November 1957

Souvanna Phouma and Souphanouvong agree to form coalition government; Neo Lao Hak Sat (NLHS) to be a legal political party, Phong Saly and Houa Phan (Sam Neua) to be occupied by Royal Lao Government (RLG) forces; 1500 Pathet Lao troops to be integrated into RLG Army; elections to be held, May 1958, to add 21 deputies to 38-deputy Lao National Assembly.

May 1958

NLHS wins nine National Assembly seats and leftist Santiphab Party wins four seats of total of 21 seats contested in election.

UNCLASSIFIED

UNCLASSIFIED

1958

Committee for Defense of the National Interests (CDNI) established with Phoumi Nosavan as leader.

23 July 1958

Souvanna Phouma resigns as Prime Minister; Phoui Sananikone succeeds him, 18 August.

1959

Troops from North Vietnam infiltrate via Ho Chi Minh trail in steadily increasing numbers to South Vietnam.

11 May 1959

RLG orders two Pathet Lao battalions to integrate or surrender their arms within 24 hours; Pathet Lao 2d Battalion escapes.

23 May 1959

NVA attacks RLG frontier posts throughout Laos.

29 July 1959

Souphanouvong imprisoned together with other NLHS leaders in Vientiane.

8 August 1959

Portion of Pathet Lao 1st Battalion escapes.

22 May 1960

Souphanouvong and NLHS leaders escape from imprisonment in Vientiane.

9 August 1960

Kong Le Coup

UNCLASSIFIED

2 September 1960

Souvanna Phouma becomes Prime Minister.

27 October 1960

Soviets begin airlift from Hanoi to Kong Le's forces.

October 1960

US military aid to Laos suspended.

December 1960

Phoumi Nosavan's forces retake Vientiane; Souvanna Phouma flees; Kong Le's force retreats to Plain of Jars.

1 May 1961

Cease-fire between RLG and Pathet Lao.

26 May 1961

Neutrality Party founded.

22 June 1961

Agreement to form Lao tripartite government.

Spring 1962

President Kennedy sends 5,000 marines to northeast Thailand after NVA/Pathet Lao attack on Nam Tha; US forces withdraw beginning in July.

23 July 1962

Geneva Agreements signed, Declaration of Neutrality for Laos is included.

31 March 1963

Deuanist and Kong Le Neutralists battle for control of the Plain of Jars.

UNCLASSIFIED

UNCLASSIFIED

Summer 1963

Small-scale contacts continue throughout Laos.

19 April 1964

Kouprasith coup.

1965

Pathet Lao gain control of large portions of Laos; at least 11 provinces under Pathet Lao administrations (out of total of 16 Lao provinces).

13 January 1968

Pathet Lao take Nam Bac region; RLG loses 3,000 men.

Dry Season (ending about June) 1968

NVA/Pathet Lao forces in Laos mount offensive against RLG.

Rainy Season (ending about October) 1968

RLG unable to retake positions lost during dry season.

2 March 1969

Meo base at Na Khang in Houa Phan (Sam Neua) Province falls.

Late April 1969

RLG forces overrun Xieng Khuang town but evacuate it in May.

May 1969

US jets bomb Xieng Khouang town on Plain of Jars.

27 June 1969

Pathet Lao capture Muong Soui, last Neutralist-held stronghold on Plain of Jars.

UNCLASSIFIED

8 September 1969

RLG forces take Muong Phine (east of Savannakhet near Ho Chi Minh Trail);
RLG forces threaten NVA base at Tchepone, in South Laos.

September 1969

New York Times reveals major US-backed RLG operations to recapture key areas from Pathet Lao; RLG captures Khang Khay, Xieng Khouang town, Ban Ban, and Phongsavan on Plain of Jars as well as Communist strongholds in southeast Laos.

February 1970

NVA/Pathet Lao retake the Plain of Jars, (lost by them to RLG, September 1969).

24 February 1970

NVA/Pathet Lao recapture Muong Soui, 15 miles west of Plain of Jars.

Mid-March 1970

NVA/Pathet Lao resume offensive in North Laos and threaten support base at Sam Thong (southwest of the Plain of Jars), and nearby Meo Army headquarters at Long Tieng.

18 March 1970

Prince Sihanouk is overthrown by Lon Nol, an anti-Communist who fought against Viet Minh in the 1950's. NVA Group 17B ceases operations in Cambodia.¹

April-May 1970

Attopeu, near the Cambodian border, is occupied by Pathet Lao/NVA forces; Saravan falls to NVA.

UNCLASSIFIED

UNCLASSIFIED

15 May 1970

NVA seige of Bouam Long.

February 1971

South Vietnamese launch "Operation Lam Son 719" to cut Ho Chi Minh Trail.

Mid-March 1971

Meo positions near Ban Na fall. Tha Tam Bleung-Sam Thong-Long Tieng Triangle attacked by NVA.

May 1971

Meo forces hold Tha Tam Bleung-Sam Thong-Long Tieng Triangle and defeat second attempt to seize Bouam Long. NVA open Bolovens Offensive and attack Paksong.

17 December 1971

NVA 1971-72 Dry Season Offensive begins.

20-30 December 1971

Ban Na Village abandoned by Meo. Muong Soui retaken by NVA and Pathet Lao. Phou Khoun and Muong Kassy also fall to NVA/Pathet Lao.

January 1972

Sam Thong and Long Tieng again attacked.

May 1972

Khong Sedone falls.

14 August 1972

Operation "Phou Phiang" launched.

UNCLASSIFIED

October-December 1972

RLG heli-lifted battalions battle NVA beseigers at Saravan.

22 February 1973

Cease-fire in Laos.

UNCLASSIFIED

UNCLASSIFIED

TABLE OF CONTENTS

| | Page |
|---|------|
| ABSTRACT | iii |
| RESEARCH NOTES | v |
| CHRONOLOGY OF EVENTS | vii |
| INTRODUCTION | xvi |
| CHAPTER | |
| I. THE OPENING GAMBIT: 1951-55(U) | 1 |
| II. 1955-59: MANEUVERING FOR POSITION--THE COALITION EXPERIMENT(U) | 5 |
| III. 1962-65: THE NEUTRALIST ARMY IS ATTACKED AS THE "QUIET WAR" BEGINS(U) | 22 |
| IV. 1965-69: THE RELENTLESS WET SEASON, DRY SEASON CYCLE(U) . | 32 |
| V. 1969-73: THE NVA MOUNT DIVISION-SIZE ATTACKS(U) | 51 |
| VI. EPILOGUE(U) | 67 |
| ENDNOTES | 69 |
| BIBLIOGRAPHY | 80 |

UNCLASSIFIED

UNCLASSIFIED

Laos was "hardly a country except in the legal sense Its economy was underdeveloped, its administrative capability primitive, its population divided both ethnically and regionally, and its elite, disunited, corrupt, and unfit to lead."--Rand Corporation Study²

INTRODUCTION

(U)Laos was less a state than a buffer, less a nation than a grouping of tribes. That Laos came to be regarded as a state was largely an accident. Explored in the name of France in the 1860's by Auguste Pavie, it was separated from British-influenced Thailand by the Mekong and from French Indochina by the Annamitic Chain. And so sleepy, graceful little Laos happened, first as a French colonial administrative entity, then as a puppet kingdom in the crumbling French Union of Indo-Chinese states and lastly, in the calculations of international statesmen, as a buffer state. By then it was 1954 and much too late; for if Laos ever did have a chance to develop into a real nation-state that chance was already forfeit.

(U)With the departure of the French, the traditional threat from the east again loomed. Indeed, the Viet Minh had already established a significant presence in North Laos. America intervened in the name of anti-Communism, Thailand in the name of border defense. Bidding for the loyalty of the various tribes began. The Lao Theung tribe in the north-eastern highlands, most of whom knew nothing of the Lao king in Luang Prabang or the national government in Vientiane, joined the North Vietnamese to serve under the Pathet Lao banner. Major segments of the Meo and Lao Lhu tribes joined the United States-Thai supported Royal Lao government

UNCLASSIFIED

based in Vientiane. For these tribes, it was a matter of seeking partnership with a strong ally who would support their resistance of North Vietnamese incursion into their homeland in the northern Lao mountains.

(U)Initially, the pressure exerted by North Vietnam was minimal. Rugged mountains, thick vegetation and the absence of a well-developed road network impeded the North Vietnamese as much as did Lao military forces. Monsoon rains played a significant role by turning the few existing, rather primitive roads into quagmires for six months out of the year. Only later, in the 1960's, after the North Vietnamese Army (NVA) had invested countless thousands of manhours in road improvements and road net extensions, did the tempo of war pass from limited ground probes to systematic, heavy infantry campaigns against successive terrain objectives.

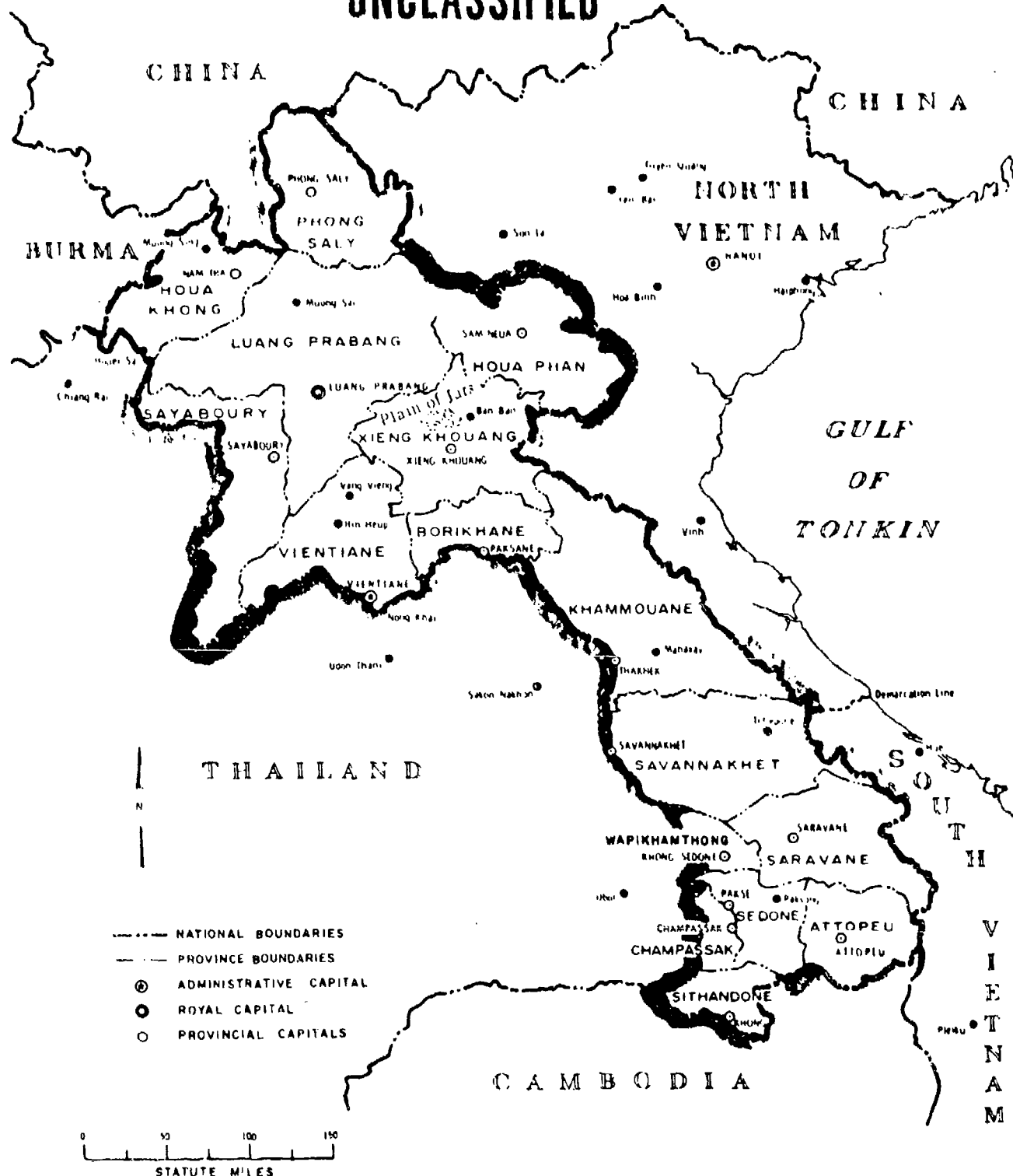
(U)But, if the internal fragmentation of the Kingdom and growing concern for the western flank of the Ho Chi Minh Trail in South Laos enticed the North Vietnamese while the terrain and weather restrained them, then it may be said that it was the quicksilver political ebb and flow in Vientiane that frequently seemed to weight the balance between attack and restraint at any given time. The feudal power and economic interests of the Sananikone, na Champassak, and Abhay families, together with the Chinese and Vietnamese expatriate communities, were arrayed against the turbulence unleashed by the promises and revolutionary appeals of North Vietnamese and Lao Communists. When their political fortunes waned, the North Vietnamese became aggressive and invaded; when their fortunes waxed the North Vietnamese relaxed and sometimes partially withdrew. As a result, considered outside the internal political context, the North Vietnamese involvement in Laos seems to lack consistency. And, considered outside the context of terrain and weather, their military tactics appear restrained to the point of clumsiness.

UNCLASSIFIED

(U) Laos, the little non-nation, occupied a role that placed it in the international political spotlight much of the time. A surprising array of Western, East Bloc and Asian Communist and non-Communist nations maintained embassies in Vientiane. It has been observed that diplomacy and intrigue were the chief industries of the city. The government in Vientiane was run by a handful of foreign-educated representatives of the prominent families dominating Lao commerce. As a result, the foreign diplomatic community in Vientiane frequently constituted a more compelling constituency than did the silent hill tribesmen in the hinterlands.

(U) Chief among these political leaders, if for no other reason than sheer durability, was Prince Souvanna Phouma. A French-educated liberal, he sought to establish unity between the right-wing elements in Vientiane and the Pathet Lao, the Marxist popular movement of North Vietnamese sponsorship. Since his brother, Prince Souphanavong, was a member of the Pathet Lao hierarchy, Souvanna Phouma believed that he could use family ties to induce the Pathet Lao away from North Vietnamese control and into a neutralist coalition in the face of foreign intervention. Souvanna Phouma intended to rely on his ability to manipulate the foreign diplomatic community to gain international recognition and support. His political acrobatics earned him the disdain of the rightists, the hatred of the North Vietnamese and the grudging admiration of foreign diplomats. And so, while Souvanna Phouma maneuvered, the right-wing generals plotted their coups, the diplomats offered their aid and the North Vietnamese alternately invaded and withdrew. As time passed, their expansionist inclinations and their growing concern with the Lao flank of the Ho Chi Minh Trail system led the North Vietnamese into ever increasing military involvement in Laos. This is the story of that involvement.

UNCLASSIFIED



I. THE ADMINISTRATIVE DIVISIONS OF LAOS

Adapted from: Douglas S. Blaufarb, Organizing and Managing Unconventional War in Laos, 1962-1970(U), Advanced Research Projects Agency Report R-919-ARPA (Santa Monica: Rand Corporation, 1972), xiv. CONFIDENTIAL.

xvii
UNCLASSIFIED

UNCLASSIFIED

"Laos must be kept out of the hands of the Imperialist at all costs; if not, Vietnam can never stay independent. Hostile forces cannot be tolerated the length of the borders of Tonkin." - Ho Chi Minh, September 1945.³

CHAPTER I

THE OPENING GAMBIT: 1951-55(U)

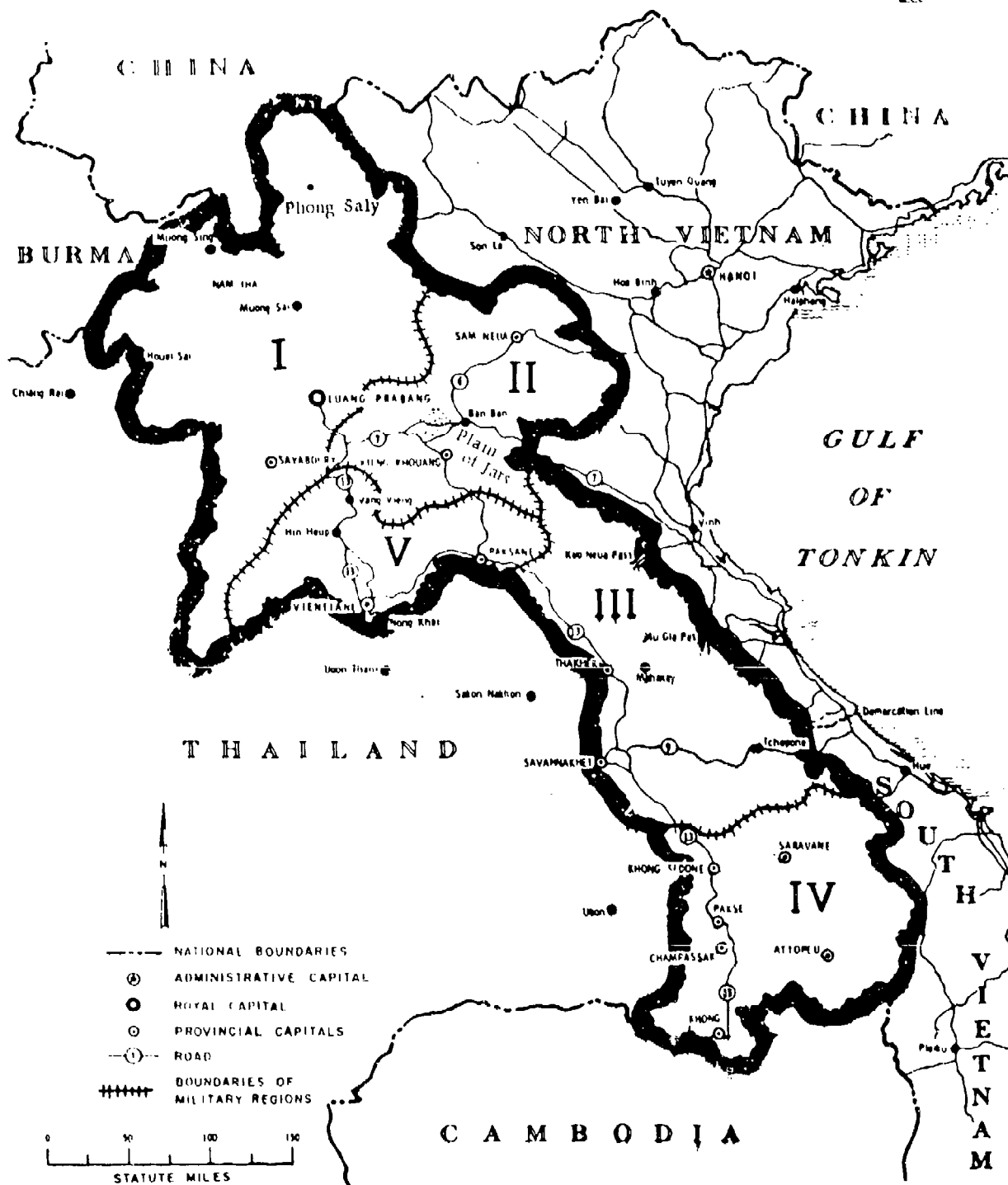
(U)Although Viet Minh agents were dispatched to Laos as early as 1945 to conduct political proselyting activities and collect intelligence, not until early 1951 did North Vietnam establish an actual military presence in Laos. Four North Vietnamese battalions⁴ began the process of recruiting and training Pathet Lao units to assist Viet Minh formations in future battles in Laos.⁵

(U)The Viet Minh had already established a strong position among the hill tribe people in the Viet Bac highlands of North Vietnam which border northeastern Laos. The Meo and Black Tai tribes living in that area had been alienated by the policy of the French colonial administration which required that the Meo and Black Tai sell their opium crop to the White Tai tribal leader, Deo Van Long, who acted as a broker for the French. The White Tai chieftain paid extremely low prices for the opium he purchased and enforced the arrangement with two, 850 men battalions which the French had raised and trained from amongst the ranks of the White Tai tribe. As a result, Lo Faydang, leader of the Meo and their Black Tai allies in the Viet Bac highlands went into alliance with the Viet Minh in reaction against the French opium policy. This situation facilitated movement of Viet Minh battalions across the border from the Viet Bac highlands into

UNCLASSIFIED

UNCLASSIFIED

1a



II. MILITARY REGIONS AND PRINCIPAL ROADS OF LAOS

Adapted from: Douglas S. Blaufarb, Organizing and Managing Unconventional War in Laos, 1962-1970(U), Advanced Research Projects Agency Report R-919-ARPA (Santa Monica: Rand Corporation, 1972), xv. CONFIDENTIAL

UNCLASSIFIED

UNCLASSIFIED

2

northeastern Laos where the Viet Minh began recruiting among the Meo, Black Tai and Lao Theung tribes living in that area. Similar recruitment was carried on in Central and South Laos among tribal groups living there.⁶

(U)The Viet Minh threat to Laos, particularly in the north, did not go unappreciated by the French High Command in Hanoi. In 1951, Marshal De Lattre dispatched Major Roger Trinquier and 150 French officers to North Laos to organize the various hill tribes into guerrilla bands which would fight on behalf of the French Union Forces. Major Trinquier set up an organization called the Mixed Airborne Commando Group (MACG) into which he recruited an assortment of hill tribes. By 1954, he had more than 40,000 tribal mercenaries employed against Viet Minh supply lines, holding the territory of North Laos and collecting military intelligence. Since it cost as much as \$15,000 to establish and train a guerrilla unit of 150 men, Major Trinquier needed large sums of money to finance his operation. He obtained the funds by taking control of the opium trade in North Laos. His principal agent in the opium collection and shipment operation was the Meo tribal leader Touby Lyfoung. Touby was the head of the Meo tribal confederation located in the areas around the Plain of Jars, and to the north and east of the Plain. Using French Air Force planes, Major Trinquier shipped the opium crop to Vung Tau in South Vietnam where it was transported to processing laboratories operated under the auspices of the Binh Xuyen bandits, who operated in league with the French against the Viet Minh in Saigon-Cholon.⁷

(U)While Major Trinquier was busy building his guerrilla bands, the Viet Minh launched an offensive in December 1952 to clear French Union

UNCLASSIFIED

UNCLASSIFIED

3

forces from the Tai country in northwestern Tonkin. Although logistics problems prevented their exploiting battlefield success to push on into Laos, Major Trinquier realized that a Viet Minh invasion of North Laos was only a matter of time. A crash program was inaugurated to expand Touby Lyfoung's guerrilla band to assist in the defense of the Plain of Jars. In April 1953, the Viet Minh and the Pathet Lao forces they controlled attacked across the border into Laos, overrunning Sam Neua City on 12 April 1953. Two weeks later, the Viet Minh, 316th Division, assisted by Pathet Lao, and Meo partisans of Lo Faydang's force, captured Xieng Khouang City. With the assistance of Touby's Meo irregular troops, a mixed force of French and Lao colonial troops stopped the Viet Minh advance with tanks and artillery on the Plain of Jars. By June 1953, a force of some 12,000 troops had been assembled on the Plain of Jars under the supervision of General Albert Sore. The French launched an attack against the Viet Minh with the assistance of Touhy's Meo, driving them back into North Vietnam.⁸

(U)To block further Viet Minh invasions of North Laos, in November 1953 the French Air Force and the Civil Air Transport (later Air America) airlifted 16,000 French troops into the Dien Bien Phu valley to establish a fortified blocking point. However, since the hills around the valley were inhabited by Meo tribesman loyal to Lo Faydang and the valley floor was occupied by Black Tai allied with Lo's forces, the French selection of Dien Bien Phu was singularly ill-advised. Lo Faydang's forces cooperated with the Viet Minh to protect the Vietnamese supply lines from attack by Major (later Colonel) Trinquier's guerrillas. Moreover, they provided manpower and pack horses to assist the Viet Minh in

UNCLASSIFIED

UNCLASSIFIED

transporting heavy artillery into the area which became a critical factor in the ultimate defeat of the French defenders on 8 May 1954. Indeed, the Viet Minh commander, General Vo Nguyen Giap personally acknowledged the assistance provided by "convoys of pack horses from the Meo highlands." Thus, while it may be said that French forces in Laos were built on a base of opium, it may also be said that their defeat at Dien Bien Phu was largely a consequence of the deadly effect opium had wrought in turning Lo Faydang into a Viet Minh ally.⁹

(U) From late 1953 onward, Viet Minh forces were also increasingly active in Central and South Laos, particularly in areas along the Lao/Vietnamese border. In late 1953, Viet Minh forces succeeded in overrunning Thakhek in South Laos, but were driven from the city by the arrival of French reinforcements. Although the fighting stopped on 20 July 1954 with the signing of the Geneva Convention,¹⁰ the Viet Minh foothold in Laos did not augur well for the future peace of that country. Nonetheless, Prince Souvanna Phouma, who had been Prime Minister of Laos since 1951, was determined to forge a coalition with Lao elements allied with the Viet Minh in the hope that a policy of neutralism would spare the country from further war.

UNCLASSIFIED

UNCLASSIFIED

"If he succeeds, the people of Vientiane will build a statue of Souvanna Phouma, standing on the bank of the Mekong, one finger extended, testing the wind." - Vientiane Street Saying

CHAPTER II

1955-59: MANEUVERING FOR POSITION--

THE COALITION EXPERIMENT(U)

(U)The Geneva Convention followed on the heels of the 1953-54 Vietminh victory in Eastern Laos. These battlefield successes left the Viet Minh and their allies, the Pathet Lao (as the Lao communist forces were now called), in temporary control of both Houa Phan (then called Sam Neua) and Phong Saly Provinces, which were designated as "regroupment" areas for the Pathet Lao.¹¹ Thereafter, North Vietnamese main force units withdrew from Laos in compliance with provisions of the Geneva Convention but left military and political cadres behind to act as advisors to the Pathet Lao. The Pathet Lao adopted the policy of resisting by force all Royal Lao Government (RLG) attempts to establish a presence in their "regroupment" area. In so doing, the Pathet Lao created sanctuaries for themselves where they hoped to establish control so pervasive that ultimate formation of a coalition government, as provided by the Geneva Agreement, would occur too late to permit such a government to exercise anything but symbolic control over either Houa Phan (Sam Neua) or Phong Saly.¹²

(U)The principal North Vietnamese Army (NVA) command and control mechanism used during the immediate post-Geneva Convention days for

UNCLASSIFIED

CONFIDENTIAL

6

control of NVA cadre in Laos was a headquarters designated as Group 100. Group 100 operated as an advisory headquarters with the mission of extending North Vietnamese political influence in Laos while building up Pathet Lao forces operating in Houa Phan and Phong Saly Provinces. Within two months of the agreements at Geneva, Group 100 had relocated from its base in North Vietnam to Ban Na Meo on the Lao border. From that location North Vietnamese cadre were within walking distance of Pathet Lao Headquarters in Houa Phan Province.¹³

(U)Approximately 300 Vietnamese military and political officers were on duty with Group 100. Approximately one-third of these were assigned to the Political Affairs Section, all of them being members of the North Vietnamese Lao Dong Party (The Communist Party of North Vietnam). Since performance of political tasks was considered to be the primary mission of Group 100, personnel assigned to the Political Affairs Section enjoyed additional prestige. During its short period of existence from 1954 through 1957, Group 100 was commanded by Colonel Chu Huy Man, while the head of its Political Affairs Bureau was a powerful but shadowy individual known only as "Mr. Hung" (possibly Colonel Dai Viet Hung).¹⁴

(C)However, the preeminence enjoyed by advisory functions at Group 100 began to fade in late 1955, and with it the influence of the group itself. In an effort to accelerate development of the Pathet Lao's 2000-man military contingent and to suppress RLG efforts to reestablish control in Houa Phan and Phong Saly Provinces, the NVA High Command ordered the formation of the 335th Infantry Division in the Moc Chau highlands of North Vietnam. The division was formed to provide a headquarters which could be used to control major maneuver units in Laos. Establishment of

CONFIDENTIAL

CONFIDENTIAL

7

the 335th Division inaugurated the first phase of what ultimately became a major investment of NVA resources in Laos.¹⁵

(U)The North Vietnamese decision to begin attacking RLG forces after a year of relative peace appears to be in reaction to progress then being made towards formation of a coalition government in Vientiane, under terms of the Geneva agreement. Formation of a coalition would automatically end the status of Houa Phan and Phong Saly Provinces as "regroupment" areas. The North Vietnamese resolved, therefore, to increase the tempo of Pathet Lao expansion in the contested provinces, and in other remote areas of the country where the Viet Minh had established a presence. The North Vietnamese seemed to fear that on-going U.S. military aid programs in support of the RLG would ultimately lead to development of a force capable of unifying Laos under the coalition banner. Although Pathet Lao forces had been able to counter and fend off the limited, small unit incursions made into their sanctuaries during 1955, it seems likely that the North Vietnamese entertained no illusions about their ability to continue doing so unless a significant buildup took place.

(U)Moreover, the North Vietnamese elected to weigh the balance further in favor of the Pathet Lao by menacing and harrassing RLG forces throughout the country with NVA forces.¹⁶ The timing of these attacks was dictated by political considerations; it was more palatable to attack while Vientiane was under control of pro-Western elements than to strike after the internationally sanctioned coalition experiment was launched. Finally, the North Vietnamese decision to extend the attacks to Central and South Laos as well laid the ground work for expansion of

CONFIDENTIAL

CONFIDENTIAL

8

dormant areas previously under Viet Minh control, which could be developed into bases from which Pathet Lao influence would be established and extended in the future. The fact that most of these areas were adjacent to the borders of either North or South Vietnam and, thus, enjoyed a strategic location in the event of renewed warfare in South Vietnam, was also not lost on the NVA.

(C)Regiments subordinate to 335th Division operated throughout Laos, with formations widely dispersed, usually in company strength, assisting Pathet Lao forces in proselyting, area consolidation, and suppression operations against RLG outposts through 1957. The 83d Regiment was active in North Laos, the 280th Regiment throughout Central Laos and the 673d Regiment in South Laos. During the period, cadre from 335th Division regiments were also assigned a variety of civil affairs and logistical functions in support of the continuing consolidation of Pathet Lao influence.¹⁷

(C)However, in November 1957, following formation of a coalition government in Vietiane between the RLG and the Pathet Lao's new political front, the Neo Lao Hak Sat ("Lao Patriotic Front"), regiments of the 335th Division were withdrawn. Having strengthened the Pathet Lao position as much as possible, the North Vietnamese seemed content to minimize their presence and await events. The dissolution of the 335th Division followed, with a scattering of its units in such fashion as to suggest a relatively sanguine attitude on the part of the North Vietnamese toward the security and durability of the Pathet Lao position. One of the regiments was transferred to duty with the engineer branch of the NVA High Command while another was organized as an independent brigade, assuming the numerical designation of the 335th Division. The third

CONFIDENTIAL

CONFIDENTIAL

9

was ultimately assigned to a state farm in the Moc Chau Highlands of North Vietnam in 1958.¹⁸

(U)The coalition government in Vientiane was based on agreement between Souvanna Phouma and Souphanouvong which recognized the Neo Lao Hak Sat as a legal political party, returned Phong Saly and Sam Neua provinces to RLG control and called for integration of a 1500-man Pathet Lao force into the RLG army. Elections were set for May 1958 in which the Neo Lao Hak Sat would be allowed to contest for 21 seats to be added to the existing 38-man National Assembly. As the year 1958 wore on, however, prospects for an enduring coalition government in Vientiane began to dim. Although token forces of the Royal Lao Government had been permitted to enter the two northeastern provinces and nationwide parliamentary elections were held in May 1958, the coalition experiment was imperiled as a right-wing reaction set in. Significant gains scored by the Neo Lao Hak Sat, and bickering concerning details of the integration of Pathet Lao forces into the new Lao National Army led to broadly based resistance on the part of rightist politicians and generals. Further progress towards political integration stalled.¹⁹

(U)The rightist reaction, led by RLG Colonel Phoumi Nosavan, occurred when a group of the younger members of elitist political and economic circles in Vientiane resolved (with CIA encouragement) that purposeful intervention was essential if the greed and factionalism of their group was to be prevented from delivering the country into Pathet Lao hands.²⁰ Their movement, which called itself the Committee for Defense of National Interests (CDNI), had good cause for dismay. Rightist political forces had all but thrown away the National Assembly election of 4 May 1958. The rightists, for example, ran 85 candidates for the

CONFIDENTIAL

UNCLASSIFIED

10

21 seats being contested, hopelessly dissipating the voting strength of their own supporters. The Neo Lao Hak Sat ran a vigorous, well organized campaign and succeeded in winning 9 of the 13 seats which it sought while their ally, the leftist, Santiphap (Peace Party) of Quinim Polsena, won four additional seats. The CDNI reformists were not only stunned by the magnitude of the Pathet Lao/Leftist victory but also by the fact that one of the key issues of the campaign addressed the way in which American assistance (including military aid) was being misdirected into rightist pockets. The Programs Evaluation Office (PEO) of General Heintges, which expended funds appropriated by Congress under the U.S. Mutual Security Program, was one target of the criticism. U.S. Embassy sensitivity to these charges led to "Operation Booster Shot" which hurriedly created 90 new civil aid projects designed to pump U.S. aid money down to the grass-roots level prior to election day. The position of the CDNI was improved, however, when Souvanna's government fell on 23 July 1958, following cutoff of all U.S. dollar payments in support of the Lao national currency. Souvanna was succeeded as Prime Minister by Phoui Sananikone who favored a hard line against the Pathet Lao.²¹

(U)The young Turks of the CDNI were also annoyed by the preposterous demands of the Pathet Lao concerning the rank structure to be assigned to the 1500 Pathet Lao troops scheduled for integration into the Royal Lao Army. Half of that force (the 1st Battalion) was in a valley south of Luang Prabang while the remainder of the force (the 2d Battalion) occupied the former French Foreign Legion Camp at Thong Mai Hin on the Plain of Jars. In mid-May 1959, Phoui Sananikone's government yielded to rightist pressure and demanded that the Pathet Lao battalions either accept integration or

UNCLASSIFIED

UNCLASSIFIED

11

RLG terms within 24 hours: or surrender and resign from the Pathet Lao Army. Prince Souphanouvong (then in Vientiane as a National Assembly member) ordered compliance with the ultimatum. The 1st Battalion obeyed, but the 2d Battalion received countermanding orders from higher echelons in the Pathet Lao structure (possibly at North Vietnamese insistence). On the morning of 19 May 1959, the RLG discovered that the entire population of the 2d Battalion encampment, the Pathet Lao troops as well as their wives and children, had slipped away undetected during the previous night. Subsequently, on 29 July 1959, Prince Souphanavong and other Neo Lao Hak Sat leaders (many of whom were National Assembly Deputies) were arrested as Souvanna's carefully arranged coalition fell apart. On 8 August 1959, part of the Pathet Lao 1st Battalion escaped from its encampment south of Luang Prabang. American aid to the RLG was resumed at an increased pace with American military advisors arriving to take an active role in building the RLG military apparatus. Finally, not to be outdone by the exploits of the Pathet Lao 1st and 2d Battalions, Souphanavong and the other Neo Lao Hak Sat leaders escaped from RLG custody on 22 May 1960, taking their entire contingent of prison guards with them.²²

(U)Concurrent with the increased scope of the U.S. military aid program to Laos, political changes took place in Thailand which led to an expanded role for that country in the struggle for Laos. In 1951, the Sea Supply Corporation, a CIA cover organization, had begun delivery of a significant quantity of armored vehicles, arms, naval vessels and aircraft to the Thai National Police force, then under the command of Police General Phao Sriyanonda. General Phao's police force soon included its own maritime arm, air force, armored division, and paratroop units. The 40,000 man police force was nearly equal in strength to the Royal Thai

UNCLASSIFIED

UNCLASSIFIED

12

Army and was more heavily armed. By 1952, General Phao had taken control of the government following a cabinet shuffle in his favor and he was recognized as the most powerful strongman in Thailand.²³

(U)CIA support of General Phao was based on two considerations. First, the large overseas Chinese community in Bangkok had been slowly going pro-Mao Tse Tung and needed to be penetrated and kept under surveillance. Secondly, the CIA was then in the process of arming and supporting thousands of Kuomintang troops in neighboring Burma for operations against Red Chinese troops threatening Tibet. Such operations, as well as those which the CIA foresaw it may have to conduct in neighboring Laos, made a stable, solidly pro-western Thailand absolutely essential. And, Phao, in return for CIA assistance, undoubtedly became Thailand's staunchest anticommunist to date. However, in return for protecting CIA shipments to Kuomintang forces in Burma and controlling the overseas Chinese, General Phao arranged to profit handsomely. He took control of the protection money rackets in Bangkok, manipulated the gold exchange, gained control of the Bangkok slaughter house, became the city's vice overlord, extorted money from wealthy Chinese businessmen and forced himself onto the board of over 20 corporations. It was General Phao's involvement in the opium trade that finally brought about his downfall, however. Referring to Phao's purchase of opium from the Kuomintang forces in Burma for resale overseas, Marshal Phibun, Prime Minister of Thailand, said at a press conference, "the Kuomintang causes too much trouble; they trade in opium and cause Thailand to be blamed in the United Nations." On 16 September 1957, Army General Sarit Thanarat overthrew both Prime Minister Phibun and General Phao. Sarit dismantled the police armored

UNCLASSIFIED

SECRET

13

division and most of the other specialized units, turning their equipment over to the Thai Army. Sarit, however, soon proved to be at least as anti-Communist as Phao, if not more so. In late 1957, he entered into a special relationship with the CIA for purposes of resisting North Vietnamese aggression in Laos.²⁴

(S)Sarit established a benevolent military dictatorship which won the loyal support and trust of the Thai people. He further buttressed his position by establishing firm control over the elite Police Aerial Reinforcement Units (PARU) of the Thai Border Police. The PARU had been trained and equipped by the CIA and Special Forces personnel as a paramilitary, counter-guerrilla force. Sarit was alarmed at the threat of a Pathet Lao-dominated coalition in Vientiane and was determined that Thailand influence the situation to promote its own security. An arrangement was reached with the CIA to use selected individuals and resources of the PARU, together with additional resources provided by the CIA to form a clandestine organization which would match the tactics of the political action cadres of the Pathet Lao Popular Front (the Neo Lao Hak Sat). The new organization was called Headquarters 333 and was located at Udorn Air Base in Thailand. PARU officers anxious to make amends for their previous loyalty to Police General Phao volunteered to serve in the organizations as did an elite group of bright, young, United States trained Thai army officers.²⁵

(C)Beginning in late 1958 as the political situation in Vientiane became increasingly tense, the NVA deployed the 316th Brigade into the Moc Chau area to prepare to launch, support and direct battalion-size operations in North Laos. The 316th, like the 335th Division which

SECRET

CONFIDENTIAL

14

preceded it, had been reduced from division to brigade status earlier in the year. Selected cadre from the 98th, 174th and 176th Infantry Regiments and the 8th Artillery Regiment, (all of which had been assigned to the 316th when it was still a division) comprised the cadre force of the brigade. Following the escape of the Pathet Lao 2d Battalion in May 1969, the NVA mounted offensive operations with main force units operating under control of the 316th Brigade. In North Laos, elements of the 174th and 176th Regiments, together with separate battalions previously assigned to the 280th and 673d Regiments (which had served in Laos during 1955-57 under the 335th Division), attacked and overran various RLG outposts located in Sam Neua Province. In Central Laos, directly north of the 17th parallel, elements of the 910th, 920th and 930th Battalions of the 148th Independent Regiment together with the 263d Battalion of the 270th Regiment probed and harrassed widely scattered RLG forward dispositions. Finally, in Khammouane Province elements of the 120th Independent Regiment were similarly active. Not until the RLG appealed to the United Nations for assistance in July 1959 did the NVA activity abate.²⁶

(U)The Central Committee of the Vietnamese Lao Dong Party conducted a plenum meeting in May 1959 which arrived at the decision to step up NVA support of insurgent operations in South Vietnam. Thereafter, in September 1960, at the 3d Congress of the Lao Dong Party that decision was formalized together with a call for formation of a national liberation front in South Vietnam. Implicit in this decision was the requirement for the NVA to secure control of the territory in Southern Laos through which the Ho Chi Minh trail passed. As a result, Laos soon became a matter of heightened strategic concern to the NVA. Whereas the political

CONFIDENTIAL

UNCLASSIFIED

15

atmosphere in Vientiane had been the dominant factor affecting NVA posture in Laos, from mid-1959 on, NVA concern with its line of communication with South Vietnam began to eclipse the importance of Vientiane politics. The Ho Chi Minh Trail became the prime means of sustaining NVA forces in South Vietnam. Following U.S. naval suppression of NVA clandestine sea-borne resupply efforts in the mid-1960's, concern with Trail flank security in the west drew the NVA into an expanded role in South Laos.²⁷

(U)A heightened period of political turbulence began in Vientiane during the summer of 1960. On August 9th, an obscure RLG paratroop captain named Kong Le conducted a successful coup d'état to overthrow Phoumi Nosavan (leader of the CDNI, who had succeeded Phoui Sananikone as Prime Minister of Laos in December 1959). Kong Le, an intensely idealistic, young RLG battalion commander, struck in reaction to the pervasive corruption which was characteristic in the RLG which he considered to be the result of foreign influence. His firebrand personality and sincerity made him a charismatic figure in the eyes of his troops. Since Souvanna Phouma was also a man driven by a personal ideal, one who had generally remained aloof from the corruption around him, Kong Le, the angry reformer, agreed to support Souvanna Phouma, the durable compromiser. Surprisingly, Kong Le, who began laying his coup plans in October 1957 while undergoing training at the U.S. Army Ranger School in the Philippines, feared "American colonialism" in Laos but seemed almost totally ignorant of the North Vietnamese role. Not until a year later, when Kong Le's Army was to encounter the NVA on the Plain of Jars, did Kong Le and his fellow paratroop commanders begin to realize that the Pathet Lao were little more than a façade for North Vietnamese ambitions in Laos.²⁸

UNCLASSIFIED

CONFIDENTIAL

16

(U)Events seemed to take a course favorable to the Pathet Lao when Prince Souvanna Phouma returned as Prime Minister on 2 September 1960. Negotiations between the RLG and the Pathet Lao resumed in Vientiane and Souvanna Phouma turned to the Soviet Union for assistance in supplying Kong Le's forces, which served as his power base. In October 1960, as the Soviet airlift began, the United States again suspended military aid to Laos. However, just as the Pathet Lao appeared to be gaining the upper hand in the battle for political influence in Vientiane, another right-wing reaction set in. In December 1960, the forces of Phoumi Nosavan, with the backing of Marshal Sarit in Thailand, General Heintges' PEO in Vientiane and Prince Boun Oum Na Champassak, right-wing warlord of South Laos, overran Vientiane. Souvanna Phouma was forced to flee to Phnom Penh, Cambodia and then to join the forces of Kong Le, which had retreated to Khang Khay on the Plain of Jars.²⁹

(C)Thereafter, when Phoumi Nosavan's forces mounted an attack along Route 13 towards the Plain of Jars, the NVA assisted Kong Le with an attack composed principally of troops from the NVA 925th Battalion together with the Pathet Lao 6th Battalion and other unidentified NVA and Pathet Lao units. The NVA and Pathet Lao forces routed Phoumi Nosavan's formations in a battle at Pha Tang, north of Vang Vieng, on Route 13 (a principal north-south artery in Laos, linking the city of Vientiane with the Royal Capital of Luang Prabang). Following the battle, RLG troops fell back as far south as Hin Heup, located 60 miles north of Vientiane. Concurrently, elements of the 925th NVA battalion launched a series of minor ground probes against Tha Vieng and Tha Thom, north of Paksane. In these engagements, NVA forces acted principally as

CONFIDENTIAL

CONFIDENTIAL

17

spearheads for Pathet Lao troops, and sometimes for Kong Le's neutralist forces as well.

(C) Restraint was evident in NVA operations during the later part of 1960 as the battle approached Vientiane. The presence of larger formations would have given the North Vietnamese in Laos exposure greater than was considered desirable. Additionally, although the North Vietnamese may well have desired to indicate their displeasure with the return of Phoumi Nosavan to power in Vientiane, Phoumi's forces were neither strong enough nor was the situation threatening enough to require the commitment of mobile formations of the size seen during the NVA reaction in 1959. Indeed, in February 1962, Pathet Lao forces, virtually unaided by their NVA allies, succeeded in smashing what remained of Phoumi's formations at Nam Tha sending them in retreat to the banks of the Mekong River at Ban Houi Sai. Thereafter, in May 1962, President Kennedy dispatched 5000 U.S. Marines to Thailand as a guarantee against further deterioration of the military situation in Laos; the outside intervention, which the North Vietnamese had previously avoided, seemed imminent. NVA forces in Laos then went into dormant status and the Geneva Convention of 1962 followed soon after.³¹

(U) Following the complete defeat of Phoumi Nosavan's forces in late 1961, American foreign policy concerning Laos underwent a change. The United States decided to support Souvanna Phouma's program of a neutralist Laos based on a tripartite coalition government. Phoumi Nosavan was ordered to cooperate. He refused, and in February 1962 the United States cut off the three-million-dollar-a-month aid payment which it had been making to Phoumi's government. The cutoff of funds was designed to force Phoumi's cooperation with Souvanna Phouma but the

CONFIDENTIAL

UNCLASSIFIED

18

right-wing General was determined to find alternate sources of funds and to continue the program of the CDNI. His solution to the problem was to establish the semiofficial Laotian Opium Administration in early 1962, with General Ouane Rattikone, warlord of northwestern Laos, as its head. General Rattikone arranged for the purchase of large quantities of Burmese opium and according to his own words:

We rented Dakotas (C-47) from the civil aviation companies and then dropped the opium into the Gulf of Siam. The opium was wrapped in four or five layers of plastic and then attached to floats. It was dropped to small fishing boats, taken to small fishing ports in South Vietnam, and then it disappeared. We are not stupid; we are serious merchants.³²

(U)Phoumi also opened a gambling casino in Vientiane and obtained permission from the Ministry of Finance for the Bank of Laos, which he controlled, to engage in gold trafficking operations. However, Phoumi's mad scramble for money excited the greed of his fellow rightist generals. On 19 April 1964 Phoumi was overthrown in a coup staged by General Kouprasith Abhay, Commander of the Vientiane Military Garrison at Camp Chinamo.³³ Thus, as Souvanna Phouma worked tirelessly to establish his tripartite coalition, the rightist forces slowly dissolved in a welter of greed-inspired infighting. By mid-1964 they bore a greater resemblance to a collection of petty bandits than to an elitist anticommunist movement. Politically, they had lost the initiative; they would never regain it.

(U)Following deactivation of Group 100 in 1957, the military region commanders of the two North Vietnamese military regions located adjacent to Laos had assumed responsibility for direction of all NVA operations, to include the activities of NVA advisors to the Pathet Lao. The Northwest Military Region, headquartered at Son La in North Vietnam (commanded by

UNCLASSIFIED

CONFIDENTIAL

19

BG Bang Giang, until 1964; by Colonel Vu-Lap thereafter), controlled NVA activities in the two Pathet Lao controlled provinces in North Laos.

Similarly, the Fourth Military Region, headquartered at Vinh, was in charge of logistical and advisory operations in the Pathet Lao areas of influence in Central and South Laos. NVA forces under the direction of these two military regions were divided into three categories: (1) NVA military advisors assigned to assist Lao military formations; (2) NVA "Volunteer Forces" (Independent companies operating in support of Pathet Lao local forces); and (3) NVA mobile forces (Main force units, assigned to operations in Laos in support of major offenses).³⁴

(C) In the operations area of the Northwest Military Region, however, the scope of NVA activities in Laos by 1959 had reached such proportions that in September a new headquarters, called Group 959, was created by the NVA High Command through which the Lao Dong Politburo and the NVA High Command jointly directed operations in North Laos. In the early 1960's, BG Nguyen Throng Vinh served first as political officer, then as Commander of Group 959. BG Vinh came to Group 959 following a previous tour as Secretary of the Lao Dong Party Committee in Thanh Hoa Province, North Vietnam. In addition, General Vinh was a member of the North Vietnamese politburo, which made him the most senior Lao Dong party official serving in Laos. His position gave him the prerogative to operate in both military and political spheres, monitoring and sometimes intervening in the conduct of field operations when necessary, while concurrently advising the Pathet Lao on political matters and high level policy questions. In his capacity as senior political representative of the Lao Dong Party, he communicated directly with the Western Affairs Committee of the Politburo. This arrangement meant that a dual chain of command existed. Routine tactical

CONFIDENTIAL

CONFIDENTIAL

20

and logistical matters were under the direction of the Northwest Military Region while political and high level strategic questions were dealt with by General Vinh, who spoke with the voice of the Lao Dong Politburo and the NVA High Command. In practical terms, General Vinh was the most senior and most powerful North Vietnamese officer in Laos, the arbiter of all political and military questions.³⁵

(C) Thus, Laos passed the period between the "two Genevas," the first in 1954 and the second in 1962. Souvanna's coalition experiment in 1957 had collapsed, unable to contain the expansion of Pathet Lao political power on one hand, and the pressures generated by the CDNI on the other. Both the North Vietnamese and the United States had escalated their respective levels of involvement, developing new organizational forms to manage their programs of action. For the NVA, Group 959 emerged as the supreme authority in Laos while American interests were managed by the U.S. Mission in Vientiane with assistance from Thailand. On the balance, the North Vietnamese and their Pathet Lao political action program in the countryside, guided and nurtured by the NVA, had shown its effectiveness in the National Assembly election campaign of 1958. Whatever hope the forces of rightist reform in the CDNI may have had for reversing the trend was dashed by Kong Le's coup. The CDNI political action program, which had just begun to achieve results in the urban areas, fell moribund as the CDNI rallied around Phoumi Nosavan's counterattack on Kong Le. The rout of Phoumi forces in February 1962 coupled with the withdrawal of the U.S. Military Assistance Advisory Group (as the PEO had come to be called) left rightist forces in disarray. Finally, Phoumi's money-making schemes following the termination of U.S. aid and his subsequent conflict with

CONFIDENTIAL

UNCLASSIFIED

21

Kouprasith finished the CDNI as a viable force.

(U)The agile Souvanna Phouma, sensing what he perceived to be history's invitation, seized the initiative. In April 1961 he established diplomatic relations with the Peoples' Republic of China, in May he negotiated a cease-fire with the Pathet Lao and founded the Lao Neutrality Party (with himself as head), and in June he induced Princes Boun Oum and Souphanouvong to join with him in formation of a tripartite government. By the time that the Geneva Accords were signed on 23 July 1962, Souvanna was again in control. In October 1962, the Lao National Assembly granted Souvanna special powers to govern as he saw fit for one year. The diplomatic community in Vientiane held its breath; could Souvanna's fragile coalition cope with the emerging preeminence of the Pathet Lao and NVA forces in Laos (20,000 Pathet Lao and an estimated 10,000 NVA as of October 1962)?³⁶

UNCLASSIFIED

CONFIDENTIAL

"This year must be different from years past." --NVA General Tran Van Tra to troops massed on Lao border, November 1963.³⁷

CHAPTER III

1962-65: THE NEUTRALIST ARMY IS ATTACKED AS THE "QUIET WAR" BEGINS(U)

(C)Beginning in the early 1960's, a new type of North Vietnamese Army unit began to make its appearance in the North Lao area of operations. These units were NVA border defense battalions belonging to the various provincial military commands subordinate to the Northwest Military Region. The units were directed to operate in Laos up to a depth of 50 kilometers to conduct operations described as being "in the defense of the Republic" (meaning North Vietnam) and in furtherance of the "international mission of the North Vietnamese Lao Dong Party." For example, the 923d Provincial Battalion from Thanh Hoa Province operated in Northeastern Laos out of a base area located in Ba Thuoc District, while a second infantry battalion operated similarly out of Cam Thuy District in the same province. All such units had the mission of monitoring the military situation within their 50 kilometer operations zone and were to be prepared to react to any military initiatives that might threaten the security of North Vietnam. In practical terms, this meant conduct of operations designed to eject all RLG units from the 50 kilometer operations area.³⁸

(C)Following the signing of the Geneva Accords in 1962, the North Vietnamese apparently determined that a temporary reduction in the level

CONFIDENTIAL

CONFIDENTIAL

23

and scope of operations conducted by the border defense battalions was necessary to minimize the risk of calling undue attention to the North Vietnamese presence in Laos. The 923d Battalion, for example, spent most of the summer of 1962 concealed under heavy tree cover to preclude being seen by members of the International Control Commission, which had been established under the provisions of the 1962 Accords. The unit was completely withdrawn from Laos in October 1962. The 923d relocated to its permanent cantonment area in Ba Thuoc District, Thanh Hoa Province. Other border defense battalions such as the 925th and 927th Battalions similarly departed northern and north-central Laos at approximately the same time.³⁹

(C)The original intent behind assigning these five to six hundred man border defense battalions to duty in Laos was one of constructing a security buffer zone of a semi-permanent nature. The border defense battalions were used to provide a defense screen on a continuing basis, backing up forward area deployments under Pathet Lao and North Vietnamese advisory control (where lightly armed NVA independent companies also operated in support of their Pathet Lao Allies). Although the presence of the border defense battalions was somewhat redundant during times of heightened military activity when North Vietnamese Regular Army formations of battalion or regimental size were being deployed into Laos, during periods of reduced activity the border defense battalions fulfilled the NVA flank security mission. However, as the North Vietnamese commitment in South Vietnam began to escalate and as the RLC began to mount aggressive military operations in the North Laos area, the twin considerations of protecting North Vietnamese/Pathet Lao base areas and the

CONFIDENTIAL

CONFIDENTIAL

24

need to conserve main force units made it necessary to expand the role of the border defense battalions to such an extent that they ultimately assumed the same missions previously reserved for units of the regular Army.⁴⁰

(C) Following the signing of the Geneva Accords in May 1962, Prince Souvanna Phouma representing the neutralist faction, Prince Boun Oum Na Champassak representing the rightist, and Prince Souphanouvong representing the Pathet Lao faction met at Khang Khay on the Plain of Jars in June 1962 at the Neutralist/Pathet Lao Headquarters and agreed to form a coalition government in Vientiane. Concurrently, in accordance with the requirements of the Geneva agreement, the U.S. military mission departed Laos, honoring the requirement that all foreign military personnel be withdrawn. The North Vietnamese, however, felt themselves under no such obligation and it is estimated that more than 10,000 NVA troops remained in Laos.⁴¹ A significant number of the NVA were hidden in a large base area which the NVA had developed in an extensive cave complex in the Xieng Khouang area. The complex had been established following conquest of the principal northern and southern terminals of Route 6 (Sam Neua city in September 1960 and Ban Ban in November 1960) and linked the North Vietnamese border to the environs of Xieng Khouangville. Although other NVA forces, such as the border defense battalions, were forced to withdraw, at least temporarily, in order to diminish the profile presented by the NVA presence in Laos, NVA formations in the Xieng Khouang area were able to remain in place, hidden in their cave complex and concealed by the thick jungle foliage of the area. These forces were supplied by the Soviet airlift operation, that had commenced in October 1960 at

CONFIDENTIAL

CONFIDENTIAL

25

Souvanna Phouma's request, to insure a source of supply for the Kong Le Neutralist Army which maintained its headquarters at Khang Khay on the Plain of Jars.⁴²

(C)By 1962 a portion of the supplies arriving at Khang Khay were handed over to the Pathet Lao for transfer to their North Vietnamese allies located in the Xieng Khouang complex. Additionally, a logistic support route was developed by the NVA to permit carrying parties to infiltrate Laos to the east of Ban Ban via the Barthelemy Pass and various trails running west from Route 7. By using this infiltration route at night, NVA carrying parties were able to supplement supplies brought in by Soviet airlift, effectively permitting NVA forces in the Xieng Khouang area to subsist without interference from either the International Control Commission or RLG forces. For the remainder of 1962 and into the first three months of 1963, the period of temporary tranquility brought by the Geneva Accords and the subsequent agreement to form a coalition government in Vientiane brought temporary peace to Laos.⁴³

(U)In mid-1963, Touby Lyfoung's Meo Irregulars, now led by Colonel Vang Pao and supported by the CIA, seized the initiative in North Laos and mounted an offensive from their new base at Long Tieng into Houa Phan Province. Supported by Air America's helicopters and a fleet of Pilatus Porter light aircraft, the Meo attack avoided Pathet Lao dominated valley settlements and concentrated on taking the mountainous ridges where the upland Meo tribesmen lived. As the Meo villages were cleared of Pathet Lao cadre, crude landing strips were built to permit resupply by air. By early 1964, Vang Pao's advance had moved from the Plain of Jars to Phou

CONFIDENTIAL

CONFIDENTIAL

26

Phati mountain, 15 miles from the North Vietnamese border. Thus, Vang Pao's force, which now numbered approximately 30,000 men, had established forward bases to within 15 kilometers of the Pathet Lao headquarters outside Sam Neua city.⁴⁴

(C)Beginning in late March 1963, the Neo Lao Hak Sat accelerated its program of infiltrating Souvanna Phouma's neutralist faction with an outright attempt to gain control over Kong Le's Neutralist Army of some 10,000 troops located in the Kang Khay area. With the support of Pathet Lao forces (then numbering 19,500 men) a Neutralist Colonel named Deuane, who had become disaffected with General Kong Le, broke away and with assistance from Pathet Lao military units, launched a series of attacks against Kong Le's forces. The Deuanists and their PL allies soon had ringed the entire Plain of Jars and had succeeded in driving Kong Le's troops westward across the plain.⁴⁵ At this point, the U.S. Embassy in Vientiane decided to come to Kong Le's assistance in order to preserve the integrity of his forces and to sustain the power base of Souvanna Phouma and his Neutralist Party. To achieve this goal, the U.S. Embassy authorized Vang Pao's Meo Irregular Army to deploy in support of Kong Le's besieged forces. The sudden appearance of the Meo irregular troops on the high ground overlooking the Plain of Jars forced Colonel Deuane and his Pathet Lao allies to break contact with Kong Le's forces and redeploy in preparation to defend against possible attacks by the Meo Army. In so doing, they permitted the escape of Kong Le's force which managed to retain control of the western third of the Plain of Jars. Had Colonel Vang Pao's troops not intervened, the destruction of Kong Le's neutralist

CONFIDENTIAL

CONFIDENTIAL

27

force was highly probable, since Kong Le's troops were cut off from their Soviet source of supply and were encircled by Colonel Deuane's troops and by the Pathet Lao forces allied with him.⁴⁶

(C)Although the intervention of the Meo Irregulars temporarily frustrated the Pathet Lao goal of gaining control of Kong Le's forces, in May 1964, they staged a second attempt to bring the Neutralist troops under their control. In this instance, an element of Kong Le's Army was induced to defect to the Deuanist Group, whereupon the Pathet Lao forces opened a general attack against Kong Le's troops under the guise that the Pathet Lao now represented the majority of the Neutralist Movement and that Kong Le and his forces were but unwelcomed interlopers. This attack quickly drove Kong Le entirely off the Plain of Jars except for a small strong point located in the vicinity of Muong Soui. The U.S. Embassy in Vientiane again came to the assistance of Kong Le with material support, by staging diversions through the use of the Meo Irregular Army (with assistance from U.S. Special Forces "White Star" Advisory Teams) and by mounting the first U.S. airstrikes of the Lao War. U.S. jet aircraft, launched from Thailand, mounted airstrikes in the Plain of Jars area and along Route 7, the principal supply route leading from the Plain to North Vietnam. Although the airstrikes were limited in both number and intensity, the implication of further United States intervention which they represented was sufficient to cause the Deuanists and their Pathet Lao allies to halt the offensive.⁴⁷

(C)While the Deuanist/Pathet Lao forces were striving to gain control of the Plain of Jars and eliminate Kong Le's Army, events were taking place in North Vietnam which would soon lead to increased NVA

CONFIDENTIAL

CONFIDENTIAL

28

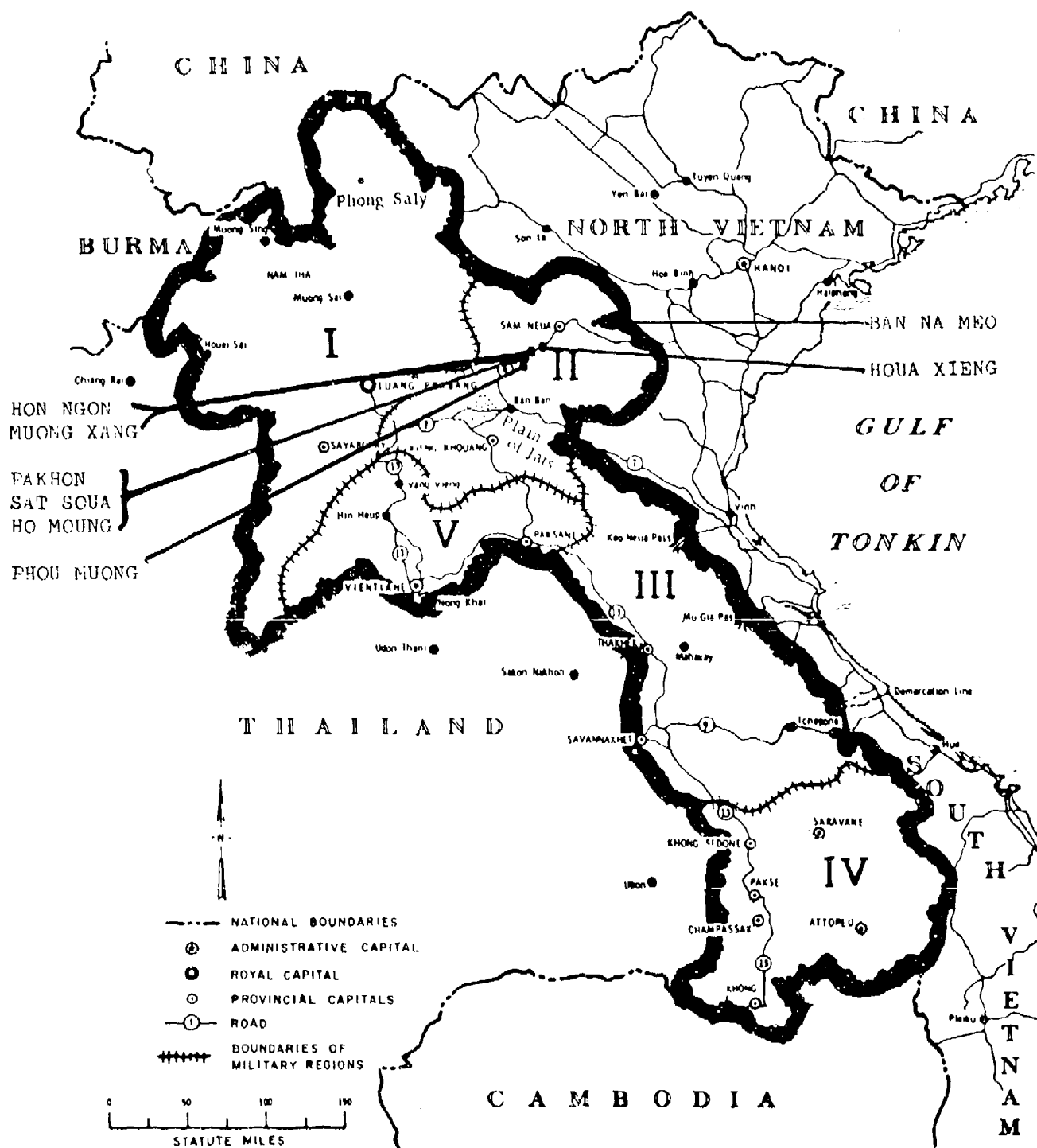
offensive action in Laos. A large open air meeting was conducted in November 1963 in Thanh Hoa Province for the assembled personnel of an NVA signal regiment, a truck transportation regiment, an antiaircraft regiment, the 923d Border Defense Battalion and various other border defense units of similar size. The troops were assembled to hear an address by NVA Major General Tran Van Tra of the NVA High Command who arrived with General Bang-Giang, Commander of the Northwest Military Region. In his speech, General Tra stated that although the situation in Laos had stabilized following the signing of the Geneva Accords, the RLG had recently moved away from its previously neutral stance thereby destabilizing the situation. According to the General, Sam Neua Province, the base area of the Pathet Lao Central Committee, had come under the control of the RLG following establishment of a coalition government (a reference to the Neo drive into Sam Neua in late 1963). The hostile stance of the RLG had forced the Pathet Lao leadership to move out of Sam Neua Province back into North Vietnam to take up temporary quarters at Ban Na Meo (approximately 20 kilometers inside the Lao/North Vietnamese Border). General Tra concluded his remarks by noting that the deterioration in the Lao situation meant that the year 1964 was going to have to be "different from years past."⁴⁸

(C)Following General Tra's speech, the 923d Battalion received notification that it was to prepare for deployment into Laos in the role of a main force unit for conduct of combat operations. At approximately the same time, the 335th Infantry Brigade replaced the 316th Brigade as the control headquarters for main force units available for commitment in the Lao area of operations. Then, in February 1964, the First Battalion of the 335th Brigade marched into North Laos to operate in support of

CONFIDENTIAL

UNCLASSIFIED

28a



Adapted from: Douglas S. Blaufarb, Organizing and Managing Unconventional War in Laos, 1962-1970(U), Advanced Research Projects Agency Report R-919-ARPA (Santa Monica: Rand Corporation, 1972), xv. CONFIDENTIAL.

UNCLASSIFIED

CONFIDENTIAL

22

Pathet Lao forces by deploying into company size formations to assist their Lao allies.⁴⁹

(C)By January 1964, the 923d Battalion had arrived at Sam Neua City where the unit was assembled to receive a briefing from General Khamtay, the Pathet Lao Chief of Staff. General Khamtay informed his audience that their mission was liberation of scattered hilltop positions manned by RLG and Meo troops along Route 6. The 923d was given orders to secure an area to a depth of 50 kilometers on either side of the highway. The operation was mounted in order to achieve domination of all the high points along the road that had to be under NVA control in order to provide security for NVA and Pathet Lao truck convoys to move down Route 6 from Sam Neua to supply the NVA base area at Xieng Khouangville. The clearing operation was considered necessary because RLG forces still maintained a series of positions along Route 6, some of which provided fire bases for RLG heavy weapons assigned to interdict the road.⁵⁰

(C)The attack commenced on 8 March 1964 with the 923d Border Defense Battalion acting as the "1st Battalion" of a three battalion task force which also included the 1st Pathet Lao Battalion (later redesignated the 205th Pathet Lao Battalion) and the 2d Pathet Lao Battalion (later designated as the 613th Pathet Lao Battalion). Although the offensive barely moved to a width of more than 10 kilometers on either side of Route 6, the operation was successful in that it penetrated as far south as Houa Xiong before coming to a halt in the face of stiff opposition from RLG and Meo Irregular Forces.⁵¹

(C)Although the activities of the 923d Border Defense Battalion and the 1st Battalion of the 335th Regiment (the 335th Brigade had since been redesignated as a regiment) were the result of decisions taken in late 1963,

CONFIDENTIAL

CONFIDENTIAL

30

subsequent involvement of other battalions subordinate to the 335th Regiment occurred in the Plain of Jars area because of NVA frustration with the Pathet Lao's inability to eliminate Kong Le's forces on the Plain. In June 1964, the NVA High Command decided to risk further intervention by U.S. airpower in order to complete conquest of the Plain. The 2d, 3d, 4th, 5th, and 7th Battalions of the 335th Regiment were ordered to join the regiment's 1st Battalion in Laos and proceed south to the Plain area where they assisted the Pathet Lao and Deuanist forces in finally ejecting Kong Le. The NVA force did not directly participate in these combat operations but was used to hold Vang Pao's Meo Irregulars in check and to allow the swift and final elimination of Kong Le's positions without interference. The NVA Battalions remained until early 1965 when all but the 7th Battalion redeployed to their base area in North Vietnam to rejoin the 6th and 8th Battalions of the regiment. The 7th Battalion, however, was detached and remained active as a security force on the Plain.⁵²

(C) Following the humiliation of Kong Le's forces at the hands of the NVA/Pathet Lao, the RLG decided to mount operations of its own in order to avoid completely losing the initiative. RLG forces combined with elements of Vang Pao's Meo Irregulars and Kong Le's Neutralist Force to mount an operation in the general vicinity of the crossroads of Routes 7 and 13. The crossroad area was considered critical to the maintenance of road communications between the governmental capital in Vientiane and the royal capital in Luang Prabang. The offensive called "Operation Triangle" took advantage of NVA and Pathet Lao weaknesses and placed overwhelming strength in an area where the NVA and Pathet Lao had only poor land

CONFIDENTIAL

CONFIDENTIAL

32

communications and no significant base areas. RLG forces did not, however, attempt to regain control of the Plain of Jars where the six battalions of the 335th Regiment and various Pathet Lao formations, together with Deuanist troops, constituted a force considered beyond the capabilities of the RLG.⁵³

(C)Indeed, so successful was the strategy of striking where the enemy was the weakest that the RLG decided in December 1964 once again to assume the initiative and to venture with a force of four battalions from its base area on Phou Phati mountain to raid Pathet Lao positions in Sam Neua Province. The raid caught the Pathet Lao and NVA by surprise and resulted in the destruction of the headquarters and cantonment area of the Pathet Lao 613th Battalion as well as the loss of two 37 millimeter anti-aircraft guns. Additionally, in December 1964, the RLG's fledgling air arm mounting T-28 aircraft sorties against NVA and Pathet Lao positions in North Laos.⁵⁴

CONFIDENTIAL

CONFIDENTIAL

When the rains come, the waters rise and the fish eat ants.
But when the rains stop, the waters fall and the ants eat fish.--
Lao Proverb.

CHAPTER IV

1965-69: THE RELENTLESS WET SEASON, DRY SEASON CYCLE(U)

(C)The NVA responded to RLG battlefield successes gained in late 1964 by seizing the initiative from Royal Lao Forces in February 1965 with the general objective of enlarging areas which NVA forces had seized during the previous year. The specific objectives included completion of clearing operations on Route 6 as far south as Ban Ban on the eastern edge of the Plain of Jars and the clearing of all Sam Neua Province. The 923d Border Defense Battalion was once again assigned principal responsibility for operations along Route 6, but the unit encountered considerable difficulties at the very onset of operations. First, a series of tactical errors led to the complete destruction of the 1st Company of the 923d Battalion in the Hon Ngon/Muong Xang area; the company lost virtually all of its 137 troops. Then troops of the Battalion's 7th Platoon, 2d Company, managed to poison themselves en masse when their platoon leader accidentally mixed a lethal variety of jungle leaf with the evening meal. Not only did these disasters cause the 923d Battalion's operation along Route 6 to come to a halt, but also led to one of the first reported instances of NVA helicopter employment in North Laos.⁵⁵

CONFIDENTIAL

CONFIDENTIAL

33

(C)However, consistent with the bad luck that had dogged the 923d since the operation began, the helicopter evacuation efforts miscarried badly. Two NVA helicopters had been dispatched from North Vietnam to evacuate some of the poison victims of the 7th Platoon. However, the helicopter pilots had been inadvertently given incorrect coordinates for the location of the 923d Battalion, flew in the wrong direction, and were attacked by RLG T-28 aircraft. One helicopter managed to escape but the other crashed.⁵⁶

(C)The NVA 148th Regiment of the 316th Division (the 316th Brigade had been upgraded to division status) was dispatched to reinvigorate the 923d Battalion attack along Route 6. Additionally, one Pathet Lao 37 millimeter antiaircraft battalion and one 105 millimeter howitzer battalion were assigned to support the operation. The 37 millimeter antiaircraft battalion functioned in an air defense role, reportedly shooting down one T-28 and damaging a second while the 105 millimeter howitzer unit was employed to suppress RLG positions at Pakhon by fire (Pakhon was one of the principal remaining RLG positions along Route 6 which still dominated a significant section of the road). However, the bad luck which had followed the 923d now seemed to attach itself to the 148th Regiment which became combat ineffective after suffering heavy losses in its first operation against RLG forces at Sat Soua, near Pakhon. The regiment was subsequently withdrawn and given a rear area defense mission.⁵⁷

(C)The 923d Battalion was abruptly left with sole responsibility for continuing the attack along Route 6. The unit made no progress, however, until the arrival, in July of 1965, of the NVA 5th Independent Battalion from the Northwest Military Region. This unit was newly organized, and was composed of over 700 recruits and newly graduated

CONFIDENTIAL

CONFIDENTIAL

34

company-grade officers. Shortly after its arrival, the 5th Battalion was committed in a series of assaults against RLG positions in the Ho Muong/Sat Soua area. After only two weeks of combat against elements of two RLG regimental-size formations, the 5th Battalion suffered over 300 killed and wounded. The unit was so reduced in strength that it had to be withdrawn from combat. The 923d Battalion was rushed forward to continue the attack, quickly suffering over 30 killed and wounded. Once again, the NVA task force along Route 6 was reduced to virtual impotence until, in September 1965, 100 replacements were sent to the 923d Battalion. Although these replacements were not sufficient to permit renewal of combat operations in the entire Ho Muong/Sat Soua area, the 923d Battalion did succeed in over-running the RLG position on Phou Muong, whereupon NVA operations along Route 6 again came to a halt. It should be noted in passing that most of the RLG units deployed in the mountain positions along Route 6 were drawn from Vang Pao's Meo irregular forces, giving the NVA good reason for respecting the combat abilities of the Meo when they employed properly sited defensive positions.⁵⁸

(C)Concurrently with efforts to clear Route 6, the NVA began expanding operational commitments in Central and South Laos as well. That expanded commitment occurred in response to NVA activities in South Vietnam. During the latter part of 1964, the first major NVA regular formations were deployed in South Vietnam. These units were comprised of the 18th, 95th and 101st regiments drawn from the 325th NVA Division, followed in 1965 by the 101B Regiment, 325th NVA Division and 66th Regiment, 340th NVA Division. The meager combat forces which the NVA subsequently committed in Central and South Laos functioned almost exclusively as flank security elements guarding the Ho Chi Minh Trail upon which the entire

CONFIDENTIAL

CONFIDENTIAL

35

NVA deployment into South Vietnam pivoted. NVA forces in Central and South Laos at that time rarely operated in greater than company strength and made no effort to mount any serious ground probes against RLG positions. Beginning in 1965, however, the NVA High Command became apprehensive about the vulnerability of the western flank of the Ho Chi Minh Trail and resubordinated NVA main force units in South Laos under a newly created, separate, headquarters named Group 565. The objective of this reorganization was the invigoration of NVA operations in Laos. Group 565 was responsible for directing both the NVA advisory effort and for controlling tactical deployments of NVA combat troops in Central and South Laos. With the formation of Group 565, Group 559 (which operated the Ho Chi Minh Trail complex) was relieved of responsibility for protecting its own western flank and no doubt benefitted from being able to concentrate its full efforts on development of the trail logistical system. Group 565 was directed to support Pathet Lao units in expanding "liberated areas," an objective accomplished during the early days of Group 565 through deployment of small advisory teams which assisted Pathet Lao counterpart units in territorial expansion, consolidation and rear-area proselyting activities.⁵⁹

(C)A significant factor which may have precipitated the formation of Group 565 was the humiliation suffered by an NVA battalion-size task force which had been sent by Group 559 to overrun RLG positions at Dong Hene. The attack was launched on 9 March 1965 by NVA forces committed in human-wave formation over open ground against heavy artillery fire without benefit of adequate fire support of their own. RLG forces easily repulsed the attack, inflicting heavy losses on the NVA Task Force. Not only were at least 50 enemy killed and another 50 wounded, but nine North Vietnamese

CONFIDENTIAL

CONFIDENTIAL

36

prisoners were taken as well. The prisoners were presented before the International Control Commission whose 747 page report of the "Dong Here Incident" proved to be of considerable embarrassment to the North Vietnamese. The entire affair seemed to highlight the disadvantages of tasking a logistic headquarters with extensive tactical responsibilities.⁶⁰

(C)Despite creation of Group 565 to manage the war in Central and South Laos, the NVA were destined to suffer further public exposure of their role as a result of yet another tactical defeat. In November 1965, NVA units involved in a joint attack with Pathet Lao troops against RLG positions in Khammouane Province were repulsed, leaving behind 15 North Vietnamese troops (including two officers) in a cave near Thakhek. Following surrender of the 15 NVA soldiers, the RLG publicized testimony received from these troops, once again clearly demonstrating the increased role being played by the North Vietnamese in Laos. Following the Thakhek disaster, NVA forces in Central and South Laos avoided further contact with RLG forces until May 1966.⁶¹

(C)In February 1966, NVA forces in North Laos began the first actions of what was to develop into a full-fledged spring offensive. Within two months, NVA formations in North Laos would represent the largest commitment of forces ever mounted in that area. The first objective was the RLG airfield at Thamla. The airfield, a small strip used by RLG T-28 aircraft attacking NVA and Pathet Lao positions in Sam Neua Province, was well defended. The NVA ground assault was begun by one sapper company which lost its entire 70 man complement within the first three hours of the attack. The airfield was then simultaneously assaulted from the north by the 923d Battalion, from the west by elements of the 248th Regiment, and from the east by elements of the 335th Independent

CONFIDENTIAL

CONFIDENTIAL

37

Regiment. The RLG forces at the airfield continued to offer stiff resistance but, despite assistance from American jet aircraft and RLG T-28 aircraft, RLG forces were ultimately forced to retreat. As the 248th Regiment pursued the defeated RLG troops, the NVA counted their casualties and found that losses had been heavy. The 923d Battalion had suffered 19 killed; the 248th Regiment, 100 killed; and the 335th Regiment 100 to 200 killed (primarily from airstrikes).⁶²

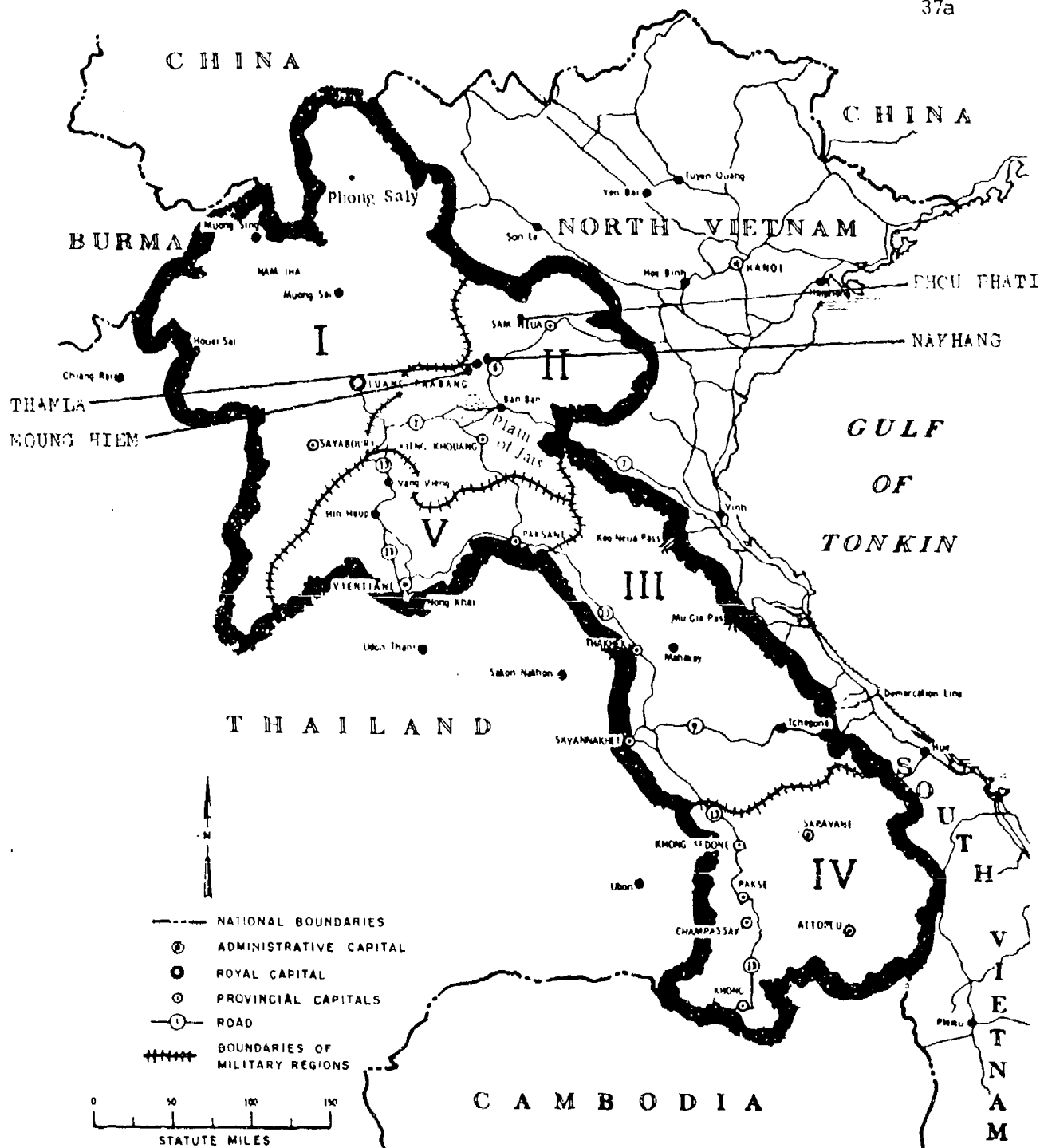
(C)Thereafter, in April 1966, another NVA division-size task force was assembled, this time to overrun the RLG airfield at Muong Hiem. In the course of this operation, NVA forces demonstrated an appreciable increase in the sophistication of their tactics and their capability to employ standoff attacks by fire. The attack at Muong Hiem was based primarily on the use of massed heavy weapons deployed by the NVA 335th, 148th, and 248th Regiments while the 923d Battalion provided the infantry assault force. The attack was opened with a heavy continuous barrage of fire from all types of weapons, including 120 millimeter mortars. Buildings and support structures were soon leveled and the 923d Battalion occupied Muong Hiem practically unopposed.⁶³

(C)Seemingly convinced that the RLG forces were defeated beyond the point of being able to mount a serious counterattack, the NVA withdrew the 335th, 148th and 248th Regiments to North Vietnam, leaving the NVA 923d Battalion and the Pathet Lao 613th Infantry Battalion to provide security for their most recent gains along Route 6. However, in June 1966, soon after the departure of the three NVA regiments, elements of the Meo Irregular Army (Volunteer Battalions 26, 27, and 28) launched an offensive that not only ejected the 923d and 613th Battalions from Muong Hiem but drove them back virtually to the outskirts of Thanla.

CONFIDENTIAL

UNCLASSIFIED

37a



Adapted from: Douglas S. Blaufarb, Organizing and Managing Unconventional War in Laos, 1962-1970(U), Advanced Research Projects Agency Report R-919-ARPA (Santa Monica: Rand Corporation, 1972), xv. CONFIDENTIAL.

UNCLASSIFIED

CONFIDENTIAL

38

The Meo Irregular Forces were supplied with considerable United States tactical air support and were sustained by air drop.⁶⁴

(C) During the period when the 923d Battalion was being driven back towards Thamla, an incident occurred which again led to deployment of North Vietnamese aircraft to Laos. Captain Truong Ngoc But, Political Officer of the 923d Battalion, was seriously wounded in the stomach. An ethnic Meo from Thanh Hoa, Captain But was considered to be an important person because of his family connections with Lo Faydang's Meo and because of his long service with the NVA (he had joined the Viet Minh in 1946-47, and had seen combat throughout the French Indochina War). Additionally, Captain But was probably a Lao Dong party member of some seniority. When Captain But was wounded, notification was sent through political channels from Group 959 to the North Vietnamese High Command which responded by ordering his immediate evacuation to Hospital 108 in North Vietnam. Two North Vietnamese helicopters, under escort from other North Vietnamese aircraft, were dispatched to evacuate the Captain. Failure to coordinate the operation with the Pathet Lao, however, led to disaster. The Pathet Lao mistook the two helicopters for RLG aircraft and brought them under fire with 37 millimeter antiaircraft guns; one helicopter was damaged and the entire formation was forced to return to North Vietnam. An ambulance was then sent down Route 6 to evacuate Captain But by road. The effort was unsuccessful, however, and the captain died shortly after crossing the border into North Vietnam.⁶⁵

(C) At the same time that NVA forces were fighting for Muong Hien in North Laos, Group 565 began assembling forces with which to conduct its first area-wide (though low-key) offensive. In May 1966, the 1st Battalion,

CONFIDENTIAL

CONFIDENTIAL

39

927th Regiment (formerly called the 927th Battalion) came under the control of Group 565 in Laos, whereupon it was redesignated as the 1st Volunteer Battalion of Group 565. The arrival of the 1st Battalion was followed by the addition of four more "volunteer" infantry battalions between the spring of 1966 and the summer of 1967. The battalions were designated the 2d, 3d, 4th, and 5th Volunteer Battalions of Group 565. The volunteer infantry battalions were assembled from widely divergent sources suggesting that, at this time, the NVA still assigned a secondary priority to operations in Laos, thus precluding deployment of entire first-line NVA regiments. The 3d Volunteer Infantry Battalion, for example, was formerly the 5th Battalion, 241st Regiment, 341st Division and had been withdrawn from border defense security operations along the northern Demilitarized Zone (DMZ) and Vinh Linh Special Zone, North Vietnam. The 4th Volunteer Battalion had previously been the 3d Battalion of the 927th Regiment, while the 5th Battalion was a composite unit of soldiers culled out of various provincial units assigned to North Vietnamese Military Region Four. By mid-1967, all the volunteer battalions were deployed in Central and South Laos in direct support of Pathet Lao forces with the mission of supporting the Pathet Lao in expanding their zone of control on an incremental basis in what became known as "The NVA Nibbling Offensive." In addition to conducting minor ground probes in support of this objective, NVA troops conducted armed propaganda activities to consolidate control over territory already seized.⁶⁶

(C)The movement of five NVA volunteer battalions in South Laos and the beginning of protracted, low key offensive operations against RLG positions on the western flank of the Ho Chi Minh Trail coincided with a

CONFIDENTIAL

CONFIDENTIAL

40

period of expansion of the trail system resulting from the infusion of large quantities of weapons and materials from the Soviet Union and Communist China. Truck transport replaced bicycles as the prime means of moving supplies along the trail as Group 559 struggled to expedite the flow of war material to the battlefields in South Vietnam. By the end of 1967, Vietnamese Army units in South Vietnam, and many Viet Cong units as well, were almost exclusively equipped with Soviet or Chinese Communist weaponry down to provincial level; no longer were they required to operate primarily with the equipment captured from the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN). Thus, by the end of 1967, the Group 559 Trail Complex in South Laos had become more critical than ever to support of the North Vietnamese war effort in South Vietnam. Acutely aware of their dependence on the trail system and concerned over its vulnerability, the North Vietnamese applied enormous pressure on the Sihanouk Government in Cambodia to permit establishment of an alternative to the vulnerable Group 559 complex. These efforts proved at least partially successful when the Sihanouk Government permitted the establishment of NVA Group 17B in Cambodia to organize the covert movement of supplies to the NVA in South Vietnam, utilizing Sihanoukville as port of entry for Soviet and Chinese Communist ships bringing the supplies. However, the NVA soon came to realize that the arrangement would never lead to any significant long-run reduction in NVA dependence on the Group 559 system. Buildup for the Winter-Spring Offensive of 1968 in South Vietnam, for example, consumed such enormous quantities of material that both logistic input systems had to be utilized to maximum capacity. Try as they might, the North Vietnamese could not alter the fact of their utter dependence on the Group 559 system.⁶⁷

CONFIDENTIAL

CONFIDENTIAL

41

(C)While NVA forces in South Laos were struggling to expand their security zone west of the Group 559 Trail Complex, the NVA command and control system in North Laos underwent considerable expansion to enable it to cope with the steadily increasing level of tactical activity in that area. In July and August 1966, the Northwest Military Region brought two new command entities into existence: Group 766 and its sister unit, Group 866. Headquarters elements of both groups were formed within Laos using personnel drawn from infiltration battalions bringing replacements to Lao battlefields from North Vietnam. Group 866 came into existence exclusively as a logistics headquarters and continued in that role until 1969. However, Group 766 was a tactical headquarters directly subordinate to the Northwest Military Region; indeed Group 766 functioned as the Northwest Military Region's forward headquarters with responsibility for the conduct of all tactical operations in North Laos.⁶⁸

(C)However, in its role as the command entity representing both the North Vietnamese Politburo and the NVA High Command, Group 959 continued to exercise the preeminent authority given it by the Lao Dong Party Central Committee (the highest decisionmaking echelon in North Vietnam). Practically speaking, this meant that while Group 766 received tactical direction from the Northwest Military Region, its activities were overseen by Group 559 which could intervene as it saw fit. Additionally, Group 559 continued to serve as the North Vietnamese representative to the Pathet Lao leadership in Sam Neua, retaining responsibility for assignment of overall political and military objectives for the Pathet Lao forces as well as those of the NVA.⁶⁹

(C)Normally, in September or October of each year, Group 959 would publish the overall campaign objectives for the upcoming dry season campaign

CONFIDENTIAL

SECRET

42

at a meeting attended by representatives of Group 959, the Northwest Military Region, the staff of Group 766, and possibly General Khamtay, the Pathet Lao Chief of Staff. Group 959 would outline political objectives, the Northwest Military Region would be given the responsibility for developing the military aspects of the campaign, and the staff of Group 766 would produce the necessary operations plans which would be implemented following review and approval from the Northwest Military Region. NVA maneuver units would then be provided with their targets and attack dates by Group 766.⁷⁰

(S) In September 1966, a special planning conference was conducted at the headquarters of Group 959 in Sam Neua Province. Those in attendance included representatives of the Soviet Union and the Peoples' Republic of China and the Pathet Lao Chief of Staff, General Khamtay. The purpose of the meeting was to determine the course of action to be adopted by the NVA and Pathet Lao against the secret United States base located on top of Phou Phati mountain in North Laos. The mountain was a rugged 5,860 foot rock formation on which approximately 12 U.S. Air Force personnel were stationed to operate navigation aid equipment in support of United States air operations over North Vietnam. Because of the rugged nature of the rock formations on the sides of Phou Phati, the position was considered to be virtually impregnable. In addition, an element of the Meo Irregular Army was positioned around the summit, where the site was located, to provide security while a contingent of Thai artillery (provided by the Headquarters 333 arrangement) was also located on Phou Phati to give fire support.⁷¹

SECRET

CONFIDENTIAL

43

(C)The meeting was called at the request of the NVA to consider their proposal that Phou Phati be overrun by NVA and Pathet Lao forces in order to eliminate the site and to obviate the possibility that surface-to-surface missiles might ultimately be installed there for use against targets in North Vietnam. North Vietnam was being damaged at the time as a result of U.S. airstrikes and was energetically pursuing all available avenues to find means to mitigate the striking power of U.S. air units. Elimination of the site would prevent U.S. air units, operating from bases in Thailand, from employing the benefit of the navigational aid and target direction provided by the site. Moreover, the North Vietnamese were deeply concerned about the possibility that the site would ultimately be used as a launching station for surface-to-surface missiles. If such missiles were installed, the North Vietnamese believed that the United States would have the capability to strike with impunity a wide range of targets in Lai Chau Province, North Vietnam. Finally, the North Vietnamese noted that Phou Phati, like the Plain of Jars, constituted key terrain from the standpoint of military control of North Laos in that these areas were the two highest terrain masses in the northern part of the country.⁷²

(C)However, to the irritation of the North Vietnamese, neither the Soviet nor the Chinese representative showed much enthusiasm for the project. The Soviet representative advised that, in his opinion, it would take up to three years to arrange for the sort of step-by-step preparations that would be required to support a successful assault on a target such as Phou Phati. The Chinese representative more than doubled the Soviet estimate noting that, in his assessment, it would take up to seven years to accomplish the capture of Phou Phati. The North Vietnamese then

CONFIDENTIAL

CONFIDENTIAL

144

responded that their forces would be able to complete the Phou Phati operation within three months and that the vital interests of North Vietnam dictated that the operation be regarded as critically important. As the discussions progressed, the Soviet representative acquiesced in the North Vietnamese proposal but the Chinese representative became increasingly obstinate, giving indication of implacable opposition to the entire project. Finally, the Chinese representative accused his Soviet counterpart of accepting the Vietnamese proposal to bring about a situation which would work to the detriment of the Peoples' Republic of China. Thereupon, the Chinese representative stormed out of the meeting and the Vietnamese resolved to move ahead with the operation on their own responsibility.⁷³

(C)The Chinese opposition to the project probably stemmed from concern that destruction of the Tacan site would be sufficient to induce retribution by the U.S. Air Force in Thailand against Red China's road building activities in Northern Laos or other appropriate targets in South China. The Soviets, on the other hand, though concerned about possible United States reaction, were in a much less vulnerable position than were the Chinese and, from the intelligence standpoint, perceived a considerable gain if the sophisticated equipment on the site could be captured intact for intelligence exploitation.⁷⁴

(C)Although the North Vietnamese finally obtained Soviet acquiescence for their Phou Phati project, they nonetheless decided that the operation would be conducted, not by North Vietnamese troops, but rather by the Pathet Lao. This decision, no doubt, was based on the North Vietnamese desire to minimize the degree of responsibility that they would have to accept for a strike directed against U.S. facilities and the U.S. military.

CONFIDENTIAL

CONFIDENTIAL

45

General Khamtay was personally charged with responsibility for conduct of the operation and was instructed to deploy Pathet Lao intelligence gathering elements as soon as possible in order that operational data might be collected and planning efforts conducted without delay. However, despite North Vietnamese prompting, by mid-1967, General Khamtay was forced to admit that the Pathet Lao had been unable to collect sufficient data concerning dispositions on the mountain to support realistic operational planning. NVA Group 959 then stepped in, criticizing the Pathet Lao for not discharging their responsibilities on a timely basis. Group 959 informed them that General Khamtay's forces were withdrawn from the operation and that the NVA would not only capture Phou Phati unaided, but that they would meet the projected three-month schedule which they had introduced in September 1966 during the initial planning conference. Thereafter, Group 959 directed the Northwest Military Region to Task Group 766 to mount the operation immediately.⁷⁵

(C) In October 1967, an elite sapper company of the 305 Sapper Command in Hanoi was assigned to Group 766 to perform the preliminary target reconnaissance on Phou Phati. After a month of intense information collection, the unit reported that the U.S. facilities, particularly the equipment site, were situated so as to preclude conventional ground attack tactics. The sapper unit advised that the site could be taken only by sapper troops scaling up the sides of the karst cliffs on ropes, and recommended that North Vietnamese air force units be used to damage the positions as much as possible in preparation for the attack. Thereafter, in November 1967, a North Vietnamese force consisting of three antiquated

CONFIDENTIAL

CONFIDENTIAL

46

Soviet built Antonov-2 biplanes struck Phou Phati. The aircraft flew low over the mountain to simulate a U.S. air drop then, at the last moment, dropped bombs at close range, losing two aircraft to ground fire in the process. However, Meo defense positions, built into the rock formation, received only minimal damage while the well-protected equipment sites were undamaged by the airstrike.⁷⁶

(C) Finally, on 11 March 1968, the 923d, 927th, and 5th (also known as 623d) NVA independent battalions mounted an attack on Phou Phati to preoccupy the defenders while sapper troops scaled the cliffs. Once the sapper troops reached a point near the crest of the cliffs they hid in shallow indentations until the following morning when they successfully surprised and overran the Meo defenders. The Meo irregulars fell back to the Thai artillery positions and held there until helicopters under CIA control were dispatched to the site. By then, infantry from the three attacking NVA independent battalions were nearing the site. The CIA officer-in-charge ordered the evacuation of Meo and Thai personnel. However, U.S. airmen manning the site (approximately 12 in all) had already been captured by the North Vietnamese sappers along with all of the extremely sensitive equipment and documents contained in the site. The North Vietnamese managed to evacuate most of what they wanted from the site prior to its destruction by U.S. Air Force bombers approximately 24 hours later. NVA sappers threw the captured U.S. airmen off the cliffs to be killed on the rocks below. Reportedly, the sapper company involved was subsequently withdrawn to North Vietnam to avoid having the atrocity publicized and the sapper company commander was disciplined for having lost control of his troops.⁷⁷

CONFIDENTIAL

CONFIDENTIAL

47

(C)By mid-December 1967, frantic NVA road building efforts had progressed to the point where the logistics problem in North Laos had eased somewhat. As a result, the 316th Division deployed both the 148th and 174th Regiment into the Nam Bac region of Luang Prabang Province, RLG Military Region I. In January 1968, these regiments were joined by the 335th Regiment, whereupon the three regiments attacked and overran the RLG stronghold at Nam Bac, capturing more than 3,000 RLG troops. The loss of so many troops in a single battle was a military disaster from which RLG forces in Military Region I never fully recovered. At the onset of the rainy season, the 174th and 148th Regiments withdrew to Moc Chau, North Vietnam, leaving behind the 335th Regiment to consolidate the newly captured Nam Bac area.⁷⁸

(C)The 5th Battalion, 148th Regiment reentered Laos in September 1968, moving into the area east of Nakhang to take up positions in preparation for renewed campaigning at the onset of the 1968-69 dry season. The battalion was followed in mid-December 1968 by the remainder of the 148th Regiment. However, the regiment did not remain long. Elements of the Meo Irregular Force had launched a surprise attack, bypassing Nakhang and were driving towards Phou Phati. The 148th Regiment was ordered to assist other units of Group 766 in countering the Meo attack. By February 1969, Meo irregular units had been forced into a general retreat but not before they reached the foot of Phou Phati. The fighting had, at times, been intense, with the 4th Battalion of the 148th Regiment losing 80 killed and 150 wounded while the 6th Battalion had lost 41 killed and over 100 wounded. About half of these casualties were attributable to United States and RLG airstrikes and the rest to ground combat. Following its success in blocking the Meo drive towards Phou Phati, Group 766

CONFIDENTIAL

CONFIDENTIAL

48

stopped participating in combat operations for almost two years. The group headquarters was modified to become an ordinary regimental control entity which was, until March 1971, concerned solely with providing security along the Route 6/61/68 road system as far south as Ban Ban on the eastern edge of the Plain of Jars.⁷⁹

(C) Even before the Meo thrust towards Phou Phati had been blocked, the 5th Battalion, 148th NVA Regiment had been detached and returned to the area east of Nakhang, arriving in September 1968. The Nakhang Ridge Line served as a base area for elements of Vang Pao's Irregular Army, and the 5th Battalion had been given the mission of probing and constricting the Meo perimeter in preparation for an all-out attack at a later date. By the end of January 1969, the battalion had succeeded in preparing the battle area for the attack by overrunning several outposts located to the east of the Nakhang base area. However, 5th Battalion was hit repeatedly with airstrikes and suffered between 150 and 200 casualties in the process. Following the arrival of the remainder of the 148th Regiment in February 1969, NVA operations were suspended until reinforcements were received from the 27th Independent Battalion in Son La Province, North Vietnam. The 5th Battalion received most of the replacements, becoming the only unit in the 148th Regiment with a full complement of 500 men. Additionally, the 1st and 2d battalions of the 174th Regiment were sent to reinforce the 148th in preparation for the attack on Nakhang, which finally began on 1 March 1969. Since the Meo unit in Nakhang was relatively small compared with the NVA forces massed for the attack, the position was quickly overrun despite airstrikes mounted in its defense. The entire 148th Regiment suffered only 26 killed and 60 wounded in the battle for Nakhang.⁸⁰

CONFIDENTIAL

CONFIDENTIAL

49

(C)With the 5th Battalion once again leading, the 148th Regiment redeployed from the Nakhang area to the Bouam Long area. Bouam Long, frequently called the Meo "Fortress in the Sky," provided an excellent defensive position. Consequently, the Meo base located there was relatively large. The 5th Battalion was once again given the mission of probing the Meo defensive positions with a series of ground attacks designed to inflict casualties and constrict the perimeter. However, during the 5th Battalion attack on 21 and 22 April 1969, 20 NVA troops were killed and another 80 wounded without achieving any significant gain. The NVA came to realize that the artillery batteries in Bouam Long, which had caused most of the 5th Battalion's casualties, were going to be a major obstacle to a successful assault of the position. Finally, in May 1969, the remainder of the 148th Regiment arrived at the Bouam Long battlefield with specific orders to capture Bouam Long, Phou Vieng, and Phou Khcun not later than the end of the 1969 rainy season. These objectives had been set to clear the way for the upcoming NVA dry season campaign which had the entire Plain of Jars as its objective and was intended to push Vang Pao's troops back into their supply base at Long Tieng. Thereafter, in accordance with its instructions, the 148th Regiment deployed and attacked Bouam Long with mass infantry attacks, suffering extremely heavy casualties. The regimental attack on Bouam Long soon collapsed due to sheer attrition.⁸¹

(C)Despite problems encountered by the 148th Regiment at Bouam Long, the NVA effort to eliminate various positions blocking their approach to the Plain of Jars continued. Elements of the 335th, 174th and 12th

CONFIDENTIAL

CONFIDENTIAL

50

Infantry Regiments and the 924th Independent Battalion succeeded in over-running Moung Soui in June, forcing the Meo northern flank back to Phou Khoun. However, in early August, Vang Pao again ventured from his base area at Long Tieng and restored the flank of his positions on the Plain of Jars by retaking Moung Soui. Concurrently, RLG Battalions drawn from the resources of Military Region V, under the command of General Kouprasith Abhay, supported the Meo southern flank by driving northwest out of Borikane Province to attack towards Xieng Khoung, thereby menacing the old NVA base area which had been used so effectively to conceal the NVA troops present in Laos during the 1950s.⁸²

CONFIDENTIAL

CONFIDENTIAL

"A short time ago we rounded up three hundred fresh [Meo] recruits. Thirty per cent were fourteen years old or less and ten of them were only ten years old. Another 30 per cent were fifteen or sixteen. The remaining 40 per cent were forty-five or over. Where were the ones in between? I'll tell you--they're all dead."--Edgar Buell, an American long associated with the Meo Irregulars to a New Yorker correspondent in 1968.⁸³

CHAPTER V

1969-73: THE NVA MOUNT DIVISION-SIZE ATTACKS(U)

(C) In preparation for their all-out Dry Season Campaign of 1969-70, the NVA conducted an extensive logistics buildup on the eastern margins of the Plain of Jars. Upon becoming aware of the NVA effort to preposition supplies in forward areas, Vang Pao's irregulars deployed supporting Thai artillery units on the Plain in February 1969 to attack the buildup by fire. Over 200 secondary explosions followed the first salvo fired by the Thai batteries and fires started in the NVA supply dumps burned for four days. To supplement Thai artillery fires, the U.S. Ambassador in Vientiane authorized U.S. airstrikes against the NVA logistics buildup. Then, in May 1969, Vang Pao led his irregulars across the Plain in a spoiling operation which overran the NVA's now shattered dumps, capturing significant quantities of war materiel. NVA regular combat formations avoided the Plain of Jars battle area because of the intense artillery fire and airstrikes, such that Vang Pao's troops encountered only NVA rear echelon units. As a result, "Vang Pao's walk on the Plain" had an almost festive character about it. NVA combat formations remained preoccupied with conduct of operations on the flanks of the Plain at Moun Soui, Xieng

CONFIDENTIAL

CONFIDENTIAL

52

Khoung City, and Bouam Long. As a result, Vang Pao's spoiling operation on the Plain gave the misleading impression that his troops were capable of operating en masse as heavy infantry after the fashion of the NVA rather than as irregular raiding forces striking from highly defensible⁸⁴ mountain bases.

(C)Despite the material losses suffered by the NVA, they nonetheless launched their long-awaited Dry Season Offensive of 1969-70, completely driving Vang Pao's forces off of the Plain between December 1969 and February 1970. NVA forces involved included the 165th Regiment which, together with elements of the 174th Regiment (part of the 316th Division), had gone into blocking positions during the Meo spoiling operation to prevent the Meo from entering the Ban Ban Valley, east of the Plain. The 165th and 174th Regiments were joined by the 141st Regiment (312th Division), as well as other infantry formations and fire support units, in the NVA sweep across the Plain. Nevertheless, the NVA forces were still unable to capture Bouam Long.⁸⁵

(C)According to interrogation reports, on 15 May, the 141st Regiment attacked High Point 1696. An NVA soldier stepped on a mine and the attack was compromised and aborted. On 24 May, the 141st Regiment again assaulted High Point 1696 but the attack encountered heavy resistance. The 141st retreated suffering heavy casualties. During the battle for Bouam Long, the 141st Regiment suffered severe attrition from combat losses and disease, and was subsequently withdrawn from the area.⁸⁶

(C)Interrogation reports reveal that, following withdrawal of the 141st Regiment, the 165th and 209th Regiments, 312th Division jointed the 174th and 148th Regiments, 316th Division, on the Plain of Jars in early 1971. It was reported that the mission of these two regiments was the

CONFIDENTIAL

CONFIDENTIAL

53

destruction of the three elite Meo battalions at Ban Na. The Meo battalions protected RLG artillery positions controlling movement along major roads leading south to Long Tieng which impeded NVA efforts to eliminate that strategic Meo base. The 165th Regiment mounted a siege operation against Ban Na; the position finally fell in March 1971 after several weeks of ground probes and heavy artillery bombardment.⁸⁷

(C)In March 1971, NVA deployments in the Sam Thong/Long Tieng area were at a level approximately equivalent to a two division force. The Meo Irregular Force of 13,700 men found itself defending a triangular area composed of Tha Tam Bleung to the north, Sam Thong to the west and Long Tieng to the south. However, Vang Pao's troops occupied terrain favoring the defender and received considerable tactical air support from both the RLG and U.S. Air Force. Field reports indicated the NVA suffered considerable losses during April 1971 without improving their position. By May 1971, it became clear that the NVA intention to overrun Long Tieng required combat power beyond the capabilities of the attacking NVA forces.⁸⁸

(C)At this time, a new combat formation appeared in North Laos. The 866th Group changed its role from that of an NVA support command, which it had been since its formation in August 1966, to that of a regional level regional command with a mission to maneuver major combat forces, to conduct rear area proselyting activities, and to assist in the buildup of Pathet Lao military forces. This change in mission had taken place in the early months of 1969. In the process of becoming a regional command, the 866th Group was given control of the 7th Infantry Battalion which had been operating around the NVA Xieng Khouang base area, and the 924th Infantry Battalion, formerly a border defense unit from Son La Province in North Vietnam. Then, in 1970, the 866th formed a third infantry battalion which

CONFIDENTIAL

CONFIDENTIAL

54

was designated as "5th Battalion," 866th Group. The battalion was composed of personnel drawn from various units already in Laos as well as new recruits recently sent from North Vietnam. The newly formed 5th Battalion was deployed in the Bouam Long area in August 1970 with an area security mission while the 924th Battalion was assigned to the Xieng Khouang area in late 1970. The 866th Group did not assume an active combat role until the 1970-71 Dry Season. The group was confined to rear area security missions probably because of inexperience as a combat unit (despite its strength which varied from 1800 to 1900 members). Finally, in February 1971, the 866th Group assumed a more active role. The group was deployed into the Nong To area to mount probes designed to tie down Meo and RLG units in preparation for a major NVA offensive to push Vang Pao's troops from their strategic positions around Sam Thong and Long Tieng, south of the Plain. Then, in March 1971, the 866th was assigned the mission of overrunning Meo positions at Phu Pha Sai, which it did that same month.⁸⁹

(C) In May 1971, the 174th Regiment received the mission to renew the attack against Bouam Long which the 148th Regiment had been unable to overrun during the 1969 Rainy Season. By mid-July, however, the 174th Regiment was sufficiently battered to require its redeployment from the area. Vang Pao's forces took advantage of the departure of the 174th Regiment to launch an offensive in August 1971 designed to recapture control of the Plain. The offensive caught the NVA by surprise and the Irregulars quickly drove as far as the eastern and northern portions of the Plain before the 148th and 174th Regiments halted them.⁹⁰

(C) In North Laos, the 335th Independent Regiment moved into Luang Prabang Province to pressure the royal capital and expand NVA/PL controlled areas during the 1970-71 Dry Season (while the 866th Group and elements of

CONFIDENTIAL

CONFIDENTIAL

55

the 316th Division were committed on the Plain). The 335th Regiment fought fifteen separate battles at scattered locations, principally in the Nam Ou River Valley. Finally, in late 1971, the 335th was thought to have relocated from Luang Prabang to the Plain where it probably joined the 312th and 316th Divisions, and the 866th and 766th Regiments. The 766th Regiment had come into existence after Headquarters, Group 766 was downgraded to permit the 312th and 316th Divisions to report directly to Group 959.⁹¹

(C)The 1971-72 Dry Season offensive began on 17 December, two months earlier than previous NVA Dry Season campaigns in North Laos. On 18 and 19 December, a number of key positions in the Phou Keng-Muong Phan sector were captured by NVA forces. Within a few days, all RLG/Irregular positions in the Plain had fallen; the NVA then shifted their area of concentration to the southwest. Moving across the western sector of the Plain, the NVA concentrated around Ban Na, forcing abandonment of the village on 21 December. On 10 January, the NVA moved to and launched attacks against Sam Thong. Elements of various NVA Regiments moved across the Plain to positions east and northeast of Long Tieng where they launched heavy attacks against forces defending the base. The NVA offensive was not confined to the Plain, however; to the west, Muong Soui fell to the NVA and Pathet Lao on 21 December. Pathet Lao and NVA forces also overran several other positions including Phou Khoun and Muong Kassy in December.⁹²

(C)The NVA next concentrated in the Long Tieng area to overrun Skyline Ridge, which was in the tenuous grasp of Vang Pao's hardpressed troops. In early February, an RLG sweep operation was mounted southeast of the Plain from the Pa Doung area north and east towards Route 4 to ease the pressure on Long Tieng by diverting NVA forces. Soon however, the NVA

CONFIDENTIAL

CONFIDENTIAL

56

broke up the RLG attack and renewed their offensive against the Long Tieng-Sam Thong complex. The NVA assault in the Sam Thong Area began on the evening of 10 March, and by the 12th, all but three Irregular positions had been overrun. Concurrently, Long Tieng underwent heavy artillery shelling, including fire from 130mm field guns. Throughout March, the seesaw battle for Long Tieng continued, with both sides gaining, losing and regaining positions along strategic Skyline Ridge. April saw the NVA still trying to capture the base from its beleaguered defenders.⁹³

(C) In April, the Rainy Season began in northern Laos and by 13 May NVA pressure had subsided. Irregular forces then launched an operation against Phy Pha Xai but the NVA halted the advance, and ultimately managed to retake Tha Tam Bleung as well. Nevertheless, together with the effects of the weather, the diversion was sufficient to permit Irregular forces to maintain their hold on the Sam Thong-Long Tieng area.⁹⁴

(C) The situation on the Plain remained relatively quiet until General Vang Pao launched Operation Phou Phiang on 14 August 1972 to retake it by employing air assaulted forces to drive concurrently from widely dispersed landing zones to the north, west, south, and northeast. Operation Phou Phiang was organized as follows. On 14 August 1972, Task Force (TF) "C", composed of Group Mobile (GM) 23, a three battalion force, began attacking northwest up the Nam Pat River Valley towards Phou Louang and the southern Plain of Jars. TF "B," composed of GM 22 (four battalions) struck towards the Plain from the west, through the "Jungle's Mouth." TF "E," composed of GMs 24 and 27 (six battalions) were lifted by helicopter into Bouam Long to strengthen that position and menace the Plain from the northeast. TF "D," composed of GM 21 (two battalions) was lifted by helicopter on 21 August to a point eight kilometers north of

CONFIDENTIAL

CONFIDENTIAL

57

the Plain to strike southward in the vicinity of Phou Keng. Finally, TF "A," composed of GM 31 and various Thai irregular units, opened attacks from its positions on the Phou Pha Xai-Tha Tham Bleung-Phou Long Mat ridge complex to tie down NVA units located southwest of the Plain. The plan conceded the advantage of operating on interior lines to the NVA, who proceeded to mass against and defeat the various task forces in detail.⁹⁵

(U)Following the collapse of Operation Phou Phiang and the commencement of the ceasefire in Laos on 22 February 1973, the relative positions of Vang Pao's forces and those of the NVA were essentially the same as they were in mid-July 1972; the NVA held the Plain but Vang Pao had managed to hold the Sam Thong-Long Tieng complex.⁹⁶

(C)Meanwhile, as events were reaching a point of climax on the Plain of Jars, developments in South Laos were also entering a critical phase for the NVA. Before the ceasefire was to take hold in South Laos in February 1973, the NVA were to undergo the chilling experience of seeing their worst fears concerning the vulnerability of the Trail system on the brink of realization. In March 1970, the North Vietnamese suffered a major shock when the government of Prince Sihanouk was overthrown in Cambodia and the NVA supply system through that country ceased to function. With the closure of the Port of Sihanoukville and the elimination of NVA Group 17B, Group 559 had to assume the entire responsibility for the transportation of war materials to South Vietnamese battlefields, and at a faster tempo than ever before. Group 559 responded by establishing an additional division level headquarters in southern Laos called Group 470. The new group was to streamline operations of the regimental-size organizations (called Binh Trams) which operated the Trail system's forwarding points, then straining to cope with the additional traffic load.

CONFIDENTIAL

UNCLASSIFIED

CONFIDENTIAL

58

Concurrently, the critical vulnerability of the extended flanks of the Trail system in South Laos became a matter of acute concern to the NVA high command. A consensus ultimately emerged in command circles that the key to defense of the flanks of the complex lay in judicious positioning of NVA reserves in South Laos. Additionally, it was decided that additional maneuver battalions had to be committed to accelerate the program of building "Liberated Areas" under NVA/Pathet Lao control in South Laos. Once this buffer zone was fully developed and the NVA reserves in South Laos had been sufficiently increased, the Trail systems would be secure from attacks originated in Laos. At the same time, if the hard-pressed ARVN attempted to interdict the system by assault on its eastern flank, the NVA would be in a position to counterattack and defeat the effort.⁹⁷

(C)The NVA buildup began in May 1970, when the 9th Regiment (formerly 929th Regiment up to 1966) was dispatched to Central Laos, subsequently relocating several months later to its ultimate area of operations on the strategic Bolovens Plateau in South Laos. The 9th was a first-class regiment which had proven itself in combat at Hue during the 1968 TET offensive. The next unit to arrive was the entire 2d NVA Division, with its 1st, 141st, and 155th Infantry Regiments. The 2d Division deployed from South Vietnam to the Route 9 area of Savannakhet Province where it was reinforced by the addition of various support units that had infiltrated directly from North Vietnam, including an SA-2 Air Defense element. The 2d Division had the mission of remaining in reserve as a reaction force in the event that the ARVN attempted to cut the Trail system. Although the NVA High Command probably did not know precisely when or where the ARVN might strike, judging from the positioning of the 2d Division, it must have been reasonably certain that the blow would come

CONFIDENTIAL

CONFIDENTIAL

59

in the vicinity of Tchepone and Attapeu. From its location in the Savannakhet area, the 2d Division was in an excellent position to counter-attack the flank of any ARVN thrust towards those two locations. The division did not become engaged with RLG forces until Special Guerrilla Units (SGU) under CIA control in South Laos made a futile attempt to assist the ARVN when it finally attacked the Trail complex in February 1971.⁹⁸

(C)To fulfill its objective of rapidly expanding the security buffer west of the Trail complex, the NVA formed three tactical command and control headquarters using personnel drawn from Group 968. The new headquarters were to direct the commitment of NVA forces at selected critical locations. The first was designated as Front "X" and controlled operations in the vicinity of Attapeu city. The second was Front "Z" (also called Front "S") and was responsible for NVA forces in the vicinity of Saravan. Finally, NVA forces deployed in the vicinity of Dong Hene were the responsibilities of Front "R".⁹⁹

(C)Front X, which already controlled the 2d and 3d Volunteer Battalions, was heavily reinforced with various elements from the 28th Infantry (also known as the 8th Regiment), the 40th Artillery Group and the 27th Infantry Regiment (also known as the 7th Regiment). The fact that all three of these regiments came from the B3 front in South Vietnam attested to the degree of importance now assigned to operations in South Laos. Thereafter, during the 1970 dry season, Front X seized Attapeu in a short but very violent battle in which virtually all of its units were committed. Following conquest of Attapeu, Front X retained the 2d and 3d Volunteer Battalions in the Attapeu area as a security force while the remainder of its force returned to the control of the B3 front in South Vietnam.¹⁰⁰

CONFIDENTIAL

CONFIDENTIAL

60

(C)Meanwhile, Front "Z" posted a Dry Season success of its own by overrunning Saravan after having been heavily reinforced; by April 1970, just prior to the assault on Saravan, Front "Z" included the NVA 45th and 46th Provincial Battalions, and the 1st (also known as the 1st Battalion, 927th Regiment), 4th, and 5th Volunteer Battalions. The 46th Battalion was newly arrived from Quang Binh Province, North Vietnam and was sent to take the place of the 45th Battalion, which departed following the battle for Saravan. Front "Z" also gained the 20th Sapper Battalion of the 305th Sapper Command in October 1970, but thereafter its size was pared down somewhat when the 4th and 5th Volunteer Battalions were re-deployed north to Savannakhet Province; these units ultimately joined with the 1st Infantry Battalion of Group 559 to constitute Front "R" (which finally evolved into the 29th Regiment in late 1971). Front "R" (often called the Highway 9 Front or Front R9A) also gained substantial brigade type support elements, to include Hospital 45, two signal companies, the 24th Artillery Battalion, an antiaircraft company, and other similar units. Front "R" remained largely preoccupied with the NVA's continuing effort to overrun Dong Hene, which was not successful, until December 1971.¹⁰¹

(C)The NVA command system in South Laos underwent reorganization in the latter months of 1970 and early 1971. The NVA High Command deduced that the split responsibility represented by NVA Military Region (MR) IV's direction of tactical units protecting the Trail system and Group 559's operation of the system itself was inefficient. MR IV controlled the maneuver battalions, so Group 559 had to beg for troops to defend its own flank. Command and control squabbles must have led to considerable friction. To solve the problem, NVA Group 559 was upgraded to military

CONFIDENTIAL

CONFIDENTIAL

61

region status. Military Region 559 was then given Group 968 to direct tactical operations of NVA units in South Laos.¹⁰²

(C)In February 1971, the Army of South Vietnam (ARVN) launched "Operation Lam Son 719" to interdict a segment of the Ho Chi Minh Trail. A portion of the Trail system near Tchepone, along Highway 9 in Savannakhet Province was penetrated by the ARVN assault until counterattacks by the 2d NVA Division forced a withdrawal.¹⁰³

(C)In May 1971, the NVA made a concentrated effort to seize the Bolovens Plateau, using the 9th Regiment and elements of the 2d NVA Division (which had deployed south in April 1971 following the collapse of Operation Lam Son 719). PT-76 tanks were employed to give shock effect to the NVA attacks. NVA infantry tactics underwent a change during these operations. As a consequence of having more firepower available, the NVA shifted from frontal assault tactics to a system of "siege first and assault later." These new tactics proved quite successful in South Laos, as the NVA (primarily the 9th Regiment) drove the RLG from the eastern edge of the Bolovens and captured Paksong in June 1971. When the NVA advance finally reached the intersection of Routes 23 and 231 at Ban Gnik, the 2d NVA Division redeployed from Laos into SVN. Thereafter, during the Rainy Season, the RLG was able to recapture Paksong in September 1971, holding it until December, when the 9th Regiment launched an offensive along Route 23 as part of the NVA 1971-72 Dry Season Offensive.¹⁰⁴

(C)Fronts X and Z went out of existence following capture of Attopeu, Saravan and Paksong. Cadre personnel released from the two fronts were returned to Group 968 which was redesignated as Front "Y" in February 1972. The NVA 6th Armor Battalion equipped with PT-76 and T-34 tanks was also assigned to Front "Y".¹⁰⁵

CONFIDENTIAL

CONFIDENTIAL

62

(C)The NVA formed the 39th Regiment in South Laos in February 1972. The 39th was composed of three battalions, the 1st, 2d and 3d, which were the renamed former 1st Volunteer Battalion, 46th Provincial Battalion and newly arrived 2d Battalion, 246th Regiment (which had come from Vinh Phu Province, NVN, in April 1972). The formation of the 39th Regiment corresponded with the redesignation of Front "Y" as the 968th Division. The new 968th Division established its support elements with formation of the 29th Transportation Battalion in February 1972, the 13th Artillery Battalion in March 1972, the 14th Antiaircraft Battalion in May 1972, and a divisional signal battalion in October 1972. The 968th Division fleshed out its force structure by forming the 19th Infantry Regiment in May 1972. Initially, the 19th Regiment was composed of four battalions: the 4th, 5th, 8th, and 9th, using personnel drawn from the Binh Tram system and the 3d Independent Battalion of the 968th Division. Subsequently, the 9th Battalion was redesignated as the 10th Battalion, remaining subordinate to the 19th Regiment for only a limited time before assuming independent status. In October 1972, the 10th was assigned to provide security for the 968th Division logistics base at Saravan.¹⁰⁶

(C)During the 1972 Dry Season, the 968th Division attacked westward to Khong Sedone and nearby Souvannakhili with the 39th Regiment. The veteran 9th Regiment had launched parallel attacks along Route 23, driving the RLG off of the southern Bolovens to within twenty-one kilometers of Pakse. The battalions of the 39th Regiment at Khong Sedone resisted doggedly in the face of RLG counterattacks by fire mounted after the fall of Khong Sedone in May. After a week of artillery pounding which the RLG anticipated would force a retreat of 39th Regiment from Khong Sedone, it became apparent that the NVA had bunkered themselves in for a siege.

CONFIDENTIAL

CONFIDENTIAL

63

The RLG then switched tactics; it waited until the 39th Regiment had brought its reserve battalion westward across the Sedone River into Khong Sedone (to replace units which displaced to the north and south of the town). The RLG then drove north up Route 13, directly against 39th Regiment's dispositions, while concurrently striking at the NVA company guarding the eastern bank of the Sedone River, opposite the town. This maneuver cut the 39th Regiment's supply line running due west into the town (although a tenuous route to the north was sporadically open). By mid-June, the NVA in Khong Sedone had consumed all of the food stores seized from the RLG at the time the town was overrun.¹⁰⁷

(C)The 39th Regiment had suffered heavy casualties during the course of the drive forward to Khong Sedone in April and May of 1972. Then, from May until mid-June 1972, the Regiment shrank further under constant airstrikes and artillery fire. The health of NVA troops declined steadily due to the scarcity of food and life in dark, unsanitary, underground bunkers. As the rainy season progressed, the malaria rate soared and the rice ration dropped to approximately 300 grams per day per man (500 to 700 grams per day per man was considered normal). The 39th finally evacuated Khong Sedone in June, and, for one short foray in mid-August, did not reoccupy the town until October (although the regiment did tenaciously hold positions north of the area through August, tying up elements of thirteen RLG battalions.¹⁰⁸

(C)The occupation of Khong Sedone was designed to tie down RLG forces north of Pakse during the Rainy Season and to serve as the anchor point for the establishment of a line generally running southeast to the Lao Ngam intersection, north of Paksong (which was then held by the 9th Regiment). The 1972-73 Dry Season campaign plan of the 968th Division

CONFIDENTIAL

CONFIDENTIAL

64

involved a two-pronged thrust which would involve striking southward from the Khong Sedone-Lao Ngam line using the 39th Regiment (and elements of the newly formed 19th Regiment) while simultaneously driving westward with the 9th Regiment, from its positions along Route 23, west of Paksong. The objective of the operation was to menace Pakse. This would force RLG units back into defensive positions around Pakse, to frustrate any offensive action the RLG might wish to take.¹⁰⁹

(C)However, with CIA advice and assistance, the RLG mounted a highly effective spoiling operation in early October 1972. Two RLG Irregular Groups Mobile (GM) (GM's 41 and 42) were inserted by helicopter into the Saravan area over a three-day period; the operation caught the 968th Division by surprise. The Saravan City area was guarded by only one NVA infantry battalion and was occupied by Binh Tram personnel and replacements for the 968th Division. The operation effectively aborted the 968th Division's Dry Season Plan. The 9th and 39th Regiments were forced to wheel around from their forward positions to move to and recapture Saravan. The counterattack got off to a slow start, however. The NVA had prepositioned large quantities of materiel in forward areas near their Khong Sedone/Lao Ngam/Route 23 attack positions in anticipation of the upcoming offensive. Thus, when the 9th and 39th Regiments were required to deploy northeast (together with elements of the 19th Regiment) to counterattack RLG forces in Saravan, significant elements of the units had to be detached to bring up adequate supplies of ammunition and food.¹¹⁰

(C)GMs 41 and 42, in the Saravan area, were soon under pressure from a considerable number of NVA units, but continued to resist until late December (thanks largely to the presence of lavish US air support). NVA regiments around Saravan proceeded slowly to constrict RLG dispositions

CONFIDENTIAL

CONFIDENTIAL

65

until late December when they drove into those positions after raining thousands of artillery projectiles on them, forcing GMs 41 and 42 to withdraw and fight their way back to RLG lines.¹¹¹

(C)While the regiments of the 968th Division were preoccupied with the battle for Saravan, RLG Irregular troops, reinforced with Thai volunteer battalions, drove elements of the 9th Regiment out of Paksong, only to be ejected themselves in January 1973. However, subsequent air-strikes proved too much for the NVA forces which again abandoned Paksong until the afternoon of 22 February, when the unit took the city after a sharp, sudden attack.¹¹²

(U)It is also interesting to note that in the 1971-72 time period, thanks to the heavy-handedness with which the North Vietnamese directed and controlled the Pathet Lao political as well as military activities, the Pathet Lao finally produced their own version of Kong Le; in fact, two of them. In South Laos, the Pathet Lao area commander, General Phoma Doungmala, openly commented to his officers at various times about the excessive degree of control being exercised by the NVA. When General Phoma died while being operated on by a North Vietnamese Army surgeon for removal of shrapnel in his arm, word quickly spread that the NVA surgeon had murdered the outspoken Pathet Lao general. Suspicions concerning General Phoma's death when added to other grievances which the Pathet Lao held against the North Vietnamese were sufficient to induce the major part of two Pathet Lao regiments to defect to RLG forces before the end of 1971. Additionally, in 1972, a Pathet Lao force of approximately 650 men located in the area south of the Plain of Jars mutinied and requested RLG armaments and help against the North Vietnamese. Again, North Vietnamese heavy-handedness in dealing with the Pathet Lao seems

CONFIDENTIAL

UNCLASSIFIED

66

to have been a prime factor in the mutiny.¹¹³

(U)Following the Paris Peace Conference of 1972, a ceasefire was proclaimed in Laos, effective 22 February 1973. The ceasefire was part of a general settlement reached between the United States and North Vietnam terminating American participation in the Indochina War. Although minor, sporadic fighting occurred in various sections of Laos even after the ceasefire, those battles had little effect on the relative military positions of the two sides.

UNCLASSIFIED

CONFIDENTIAL

Senator Kennedy: So now we apparently have up to 700 bombing sorties a day over Laos, and this seems to me to be a pretty full-time job for any American Ambassador to review in detail all the sorties that take place . . .

Ambassador Sullivan: "It took all my time."¹¹⁴

CHAPTER VI

EPILOGUE(U)

(U)A Formal ceasefire was proclaimed in Laos on 21 February 1973. By May of 1974, Souvanna Phouma had established a coalition government with Souphanouvong again representing the Pathet Lao. Within a year, the right-wing generals had fled, Souvanna Phouma was excluded from the government, Souphanouvong was reduced to secondary status and the singularly pro-North Vietnam faction of the Pathet Lao leaders, Kaysone Phomvihan and Nouhak Phomsavan were in power. Laos was proclaimed to be a Communist state.¹¹⁵

(C)The "Secret War" was over. By the early 1970's, 40,000-100,000 Meo¹¹⁶ and well over 15,000¹¹⁷ Lao were casualties. More than 700,000 people had been driven into refugee status during the war.¹¹⁸ By 1970, approximately 67,000 NVA were fighting on Lao soil. The United States responded by steadily increasing air sorties in support of the RLG, from a few in 1964 to some 42,000 in FY 1970. Approximately \$300 million per year was spent supporting the United States effort in Laos in the early 1970's (not counting bombing of the Ho Chi Minh Trail).¹¹⁹

(U)The "Quiet War" became the "Secret War" and then just one more element of the Indochina War.

CONFIDENTIAL

UNCLASSIFIED

ENDNOTES

UNCLASSIFIED

UNCLASSIFIED

ENDNOTES

1

Paul F. Langer and Joseph J. Zasloff, North Vietnam and the Pathet Lao: Partners in the Struggle for Laos (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1970), 196-223.

This book was the result of lengthy research in Vientiane under Rand Corporation sponsorship. The authors interviewed 53 NVA and Pathet Lao defectors and prisoners of war. They also spoke at length with Lao and U.S. intelligence personnel and were given access to documentary material not available in the public domain. As a result, their treatment of the NVA/Pathet Lao relationship is detailed.

2

Douglas S. Blaufarb, Organizing and Managing Unconventional War in Laos, 1962-1970(U), Advanced Research Projects Agency Report R-919-ARPA (Santa Monica: Rand Corp, 1972), CONFIDENTIAL, v, UNCLASSIFIED.

3

Arthur J. Dommen, Conflict in Laos; the Politics of Neutralization (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1971), 359.

4

Paul F. Langer and Joseph J. Zasloff, North Vietnam and the Pathet Lao: Partners in the Struggle for Laos (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1970), 196-197.

5

Ibid., 46-54.

6

Alfred W. McCoy, The Politics of Heroin in Southeast Asia (New York: Harper and Row, Publishers, 1972), 100-106.

McCoy's book is an excellent source concerning Meo politics, Meo involvement in the First Indochina War and the influence of French "Opium Politics" in Laos during and after World War II.

7

Ibid., 92-102.

8

Ibid., 100-101.

9

Ibid., 105-106.

10

Langer, 196-197.

UNCLASSIFIED

70

11

Joseph J. Zasloff, The Pathet Lao: Leadership and Organization (Lexington, Mass.: D. C. Heath and Co., 1973), 45.

This book was written based on a report prepared in Laos by the author for the Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency. The report was done under auspices of the Rand Corporation and bears report designation R-949-ARPA, July 1973. Zasloff's book provided useful background concerning evolution of Pathet Lao political organizations. Briefly, it notes that the Pathet Lao were a direct descendant of the Lao Issara (Free Lao) organization formed in Thailand by Lao expatriates, including both Prince Souvanna Phouma and his half-brother, the "Red Prince," Souphanouvong. Following its dissolution in 1949, the more radical left-wing elements formed the Neo Lao Issara (Lao Freedom Front) on August 13, 1950. The front and the "Resistance Government" it spawned operated from Tuyen Quang in North Vietnam. Thereafter, sometime in 1955 the Lao communists formed their own party, the Phak Pasason Lao, separate from the Vietnamese Lao Dong Party (The Communist Party of North Vietnam). Early the following year, the Neo Lao Hak Sat (Lao Patriotic Front) was set up to replace the Neo Lao Issara. The military forces of the new front were called the Pathet Lao (Land of the Lao); a term which was soon applied to the civilian as well as military elements of the front. The Geneva Convention of 1954 provided the Pathet Lao with the right to regroup together with the Viet Minh in Sam Neua and Phong Saly Provinces of Laos pending establishment of a coalition government in Vientiane. The Pathet Lao exploited the opportunity to extend its control throughout the two Provinces and was firmly entrenched in many areas by the time a tentative agreement was signed in 1956, inaugurating the coalition experiment in Vientiane.

12

Paul F. Langer and Joseph J. Zasloff, North Vietnam and the Pathet Lao: Partners in the Struggle for Laos (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1970), 62.

13

Ibid., 63.

14

Ibid., 64.

15

Intelligence Report 6 856 0018 74, NVA Participation in the War for North Laos: 1955-1973(U), U.S. Defense Attache Office, Vientiane (Laos, May 1974), SECRET, para 1, CONFIDENTIAL.

16

Ibid.

17

Ibid.

UNCLASSIFIED

UNCLASSIFIED

71

18

Ibid.

19

Langer, 63-67.

20

Arthur J. Dommen, Conflict in Laos: the Politics of Neutralization (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1971), 125-128.

21

Ibid., 102-111.

22

Ibid., 117-121.

23

Alfred W. McCoy, The Politics of Heroin in Southeast Asia (New York: Harper and Row Publishers, 1972), 136-144.

24

Ibid.

25

Intelligence Study, Lao Intelligence and Security Services, 1955-1973(U), U.S. Defense Attache Office, Vientiane (Laos, December 73) SECRET.

26

Intelligence Report 6 856 0018 74, para 2.

27

Langer, 70-71.

28

Dommen, 141-149, 256.

29

Ibid., 154-158; 164-170.

30

Intelligence Report 6 856 0018 74, para 2.

31

Ibid.

32

McCoy, 258-262.

33

Ibid.

34

Langer, 110-114.

UNCLASSIFIED

UNCLASSIFIED

72

35 Intelligence Report 6 856 0018 74, para 16-17.

36 Langer, 203-205.

37 Intelligence Report 6 858 0018 74, NVA Participation in the War for North Laos: 1955-1973(U), U.S. Defense Attache Office, Vientiane (Laos, May 1974), SECRET, para 5, CONFIDENTIAL.

38 Unpublished notes based on interrogation of NVA rallier, Lt Lo Van Can, by CWO Sedgwick D. Tourison, Interrogation Officer, U.S. Army Exploitation Team, Defense Attache Office, Vientiane, Laos. Lt Can was an NVA officer with five years experience in North Laos who defected in 1972. Source as cited in Intelligence Report 6 858 0018 74, NVA Participation in the War for North Laos: 1955-1973(U), U.S. Defense Attache Office, Vientiane (Laos, May 1974), SECRET, para 3-4, CONFIDENTIAL.

39 Ibid.

40 Ibid.

41 Paul F. Langer and Joseph J. Zasloff, North Vietnam and the Pathet Lao: Partners in the Struggle for Laos (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1970), 79.

42 Intelligence Report 6 856 0018 74, para 2.

43 Ibid., para 8.

44 Alfred W. McCoy, The Politics of Heroin in Southeast Asia (New York: Harper and Row Publishers, 1972), 275-276.

45 Langer, 81, 87-88.

46 Douglas S. Blaufarb, Organizing and Managing Unconventional War in Laos, 1962-1970(U), Advanced Research Projects Agency Report R-919-ARPA (Santa Monica: Rand Corporation, 1972), 22-23.

47 Ibid., 23-24.

48 Intelligence Report 6 856 0018 74, para 5.

49 Ibid., para 5-7.

50 Ibid., para 8.

UNCLASSIFIED

UNCLASSIFIED

73

51

Ibid.

52

Ibid., para 9.

53

Blaufarb, 26.

54

Intelligence Report 6 856 0018 74, para 10.

55

Intelligence Report 6 856 0018 74, NVA Participation in the War for North Laos: 1955-1973(U), U.S. Defense Attache Office, Vientiane (Laos, May 1974), SECRET, para 11, CONFIDENTIAL.

56

Ibid.

57

Ibid., para 12.

58

Ibid.

59

Intelligence Report 6 858 0017 74. NVA Participation in the War for South Laos: 1962-1973(U), U.S. Defense Attache Office, Vientiane (Laos, 1 May 1974). SECRET.

60

Ibid., para 4.

61

Paul F. Langer and Joseph J. Zasloff, North Vietnam and the Pathet Lao: Partners in the Struggle for Laos (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1970), 160.

62

Intelligence Report 6 856 0018 74, para 14.

63

Ibid.

64

Ibid.

65

Ibid., para 15.

66

Intelligence Report 6 858 0017 74, para 5.

UNCLASSIFIED

SECRET

74

67

Ibid., para 6-7.

68

Intelligence Report 6 858 0018 74, para 16.

69

Ibid.

70

Ibid.

71

Ibid., para 18.

72

Ibid.

73

Ibid.

74

Ibid.

75

Ibid., para 18-19.

76

Ibid., para 20.

77

Ibid.

(S)The details provided concerning the capture and execution of U.S. personnel on Phou Phati and subsequent NVA efforts to suppress the incident are from the debriefing of NVA rallier, Lieutenant Lo Van Can, by CWO Tourison; complete coroboration for Lieutenant Can's account cannot be provided, as he is the only NVA soldier ever debriefed who had actually participated in the Phou Phati attack. Lieutenant Can led his company up the Phou Phati cliffs on ropes dropped by NVA sappers who secured the Phou Phati facilities. His information concerning the disposition of U.S. airmen was based on information obtained from other NVA officers after he relieved the sappers at the site. However, portions of the information he provided concerning conditions at the site have been checked and found to be accurate by CWO Tourison. For example, Lieutenant Can claimed that the site's generators were still running when occupied at dawn; its electrical equipment was still believed operational as late as mid-afternoon of the same day, powered by auxillary generators located near the point where Phou Phati defenders (mostly irregulars) were being evacuated. Additionally, Lieutenant Can's description of the site, use of ropes by the NVA to scale Phou Phati, the artillery positions, layout of the radar site and

SECRET

SECRET

75

the appearance of the U.S. commissary match favorably with the recollections of the U.S. personnel who were there shortly before the site was seized. The only apparent discrepancy in Lo Van Can's account relates to his statement that one American was reportedly rescued by helicopter from Phou Phati after its fall. Lieutenant Can disclosed that he had been told that the man was one of those thrown from the cliff but that his life was saved when he apparently became wedged in a rock formation. Actually, one American CIA Case Officer was evacuated from Phou Phati prior to its capture, but he was not one of the U.S. airmen from the site.

78

Intelligence Report 6 858 0018 74, para 21.

79

Ibid., para 22-23.

80

Ibid.

81

Ibid., para 24.

82

Ibid., para 25.

83

Alfred W. McCoy, The Politics of Heroin in Southeast Asia (New York: Harper and Row Publishers, 1972), 281.

84

Intelligence Report 6 858 0018 74, NVA Participation in the War for North Laos: 1955-1973(U), U.S. Defense Attache Office, Vientiane (Laos, May 1974), SECRET, para 26, CONFIDENTIAL.

(C)Data extracted from this source and cited in this endnote, through Endnote 95, are based largely on unpublished unit history summaries of the 335th Independent Regiment and the 316th Division produced jointly by the Special Reporting Facility, Udorn Base and the 500th Military Intelligence Group. These studies, classified CONFIDENTIAL, were originally written in 1970, then updated at my request in 1973. Details concerning the involvement of the 312th Division were also contained in the narrative of these two studies. The studies were based on extensive order of battle card files held at Udorn Base which reflected much unpublished information provided by CIA Case Officers and military intelligence sources. In particular, these files benefited from unpublished input provided by Meo interrogations of NVA prisoners of war. Finally, the files of the U.S. Army Exploration Team, Defense Attache Office, Vientiane were also used, supplemented by conversations with Team interrogators.

85

Intelligence Report 6 858 0018 74, para 27.

86

Ibid., para 28.

SECRET

CONFIDENTIAL

76

87
Ibid., para 29.

88
Ibid., para 30.

89
Ibid., para 31.

90
Ibid., para 32.

91
Ibid., para 34.

92
Ibid., para 37.

93
Ibid., para 38.

94
Ibid., para 39.

95
Intelligence Report 6 858 0019 74, The Last Six Months of the 1972-1973 Plaine Des Jarres Campaign(U), U.S. Defense Attache Office, Vientiane (Laos, May 1974). SECRET.

96
Intelligence Report 6 858 0018 74, para 40.

97
Intelligence Report 6 858 0017 74, NVA Participation in the War for South Laos: 1962-1973(U), U.S. Defense Attache Office, Vientiane (Laos, May 1974), SECRET, para 9, CONFIDENTIAL.

(C)Data extracted from this source and cited in this endnote, through Endnote 112 is based on information originally obtained from the following: (1) extensive order of battle files of the U.S. Army Exploitation Team, Defense Attache Office (DAO), Vientiane, Laos; (2) interviews with CWO Sedgwick D. Tourison, whose expertise derived from fluency in both Lao and Vietnamese, previous service with MACV J-2, and three years as Chief Interrogation Supervisor, U.S. Army Exploitation Team, Vientiane; and (3) intelligence reports of Special Reporting Facility, Udorn and USDAO, Vientiane.

98
Ibid., para 10.

99
Ibid., para 11.

100
Ibid., para 12-13.

CONFIDENTIAL

UNCLASSIFIED

77

101

Ibid.

102

Ibid., para 13.

103

Ibid., para 14.

104

Ibid., para 15.

105

Ibid., para 16.

106

Ibid., para 17.

107

Ibid., para 18.

108

Ibid., para 19.

109

Ibid., para 20.

110

Ibid., para 21.

111

Ibid., para 22.

112

Ibid., para 23.

113

Interview on 19 November 1976 with Major David McKnight, Deputy Special Security Officer, U.S. Defense Attache Office, Vientiane, 1973-1974.

114

Douglas S. Blaufarb, Organizing and Managing Unconventional War in Laos, 1962-1970(U), Advanced Research Projects Agency Report R-919-ARPA (Santa Monica: Rand Corporation, 1972), 99. CONFIDENTIAL.

115

Robert Shaplen, "Letter from Laos," The New Yorker, August 2, 1975, 64-69.

116

Blaufarb, 86.

UNCLASSIFIED

UNCLASSIFIED

78

117

Arthur J. Dommen, Conflict in Laos; The Politics of Neutralization (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1971), 403.

118

Blaufarb, 86.

119

Ibid., 14, ix and 86.

UNCLASSIFIED

UNCLASSIFIED

BIBLIOGRAPHY

UNCLASSIFIED

UNCLASSIFIED

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Adams, Nina S., and Alfred W. McCoy (eds.). Laos: War and Revolution. New York: Harper and Row, 1971.

Blaufarb, Douglas S. Organizing and Managing Unconventional War in Laos, 1962-1970(U). Advanced Research Projects Agency Report R-919-ARPA. Santa Monica, CA.: Rand Corporation, 1972. CONFIDENTIAL.

Dommen, Arthur J. Conflict in Laos; the Politics of Neutralization. New York: Praeger Publishers, 1971.

Lebar, Frank M., and Adrienne Suddard (eds.). Laos. The Survey of World Cultures Series. New Haven: Human Relations Area Files Press, 1967.

Langer, Paul F., and Joseph J. Zasloff. North Vietnam and The Pathet Lao: Partners in the Struggle for Laos. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1970.

McCoy, Alfred W. The Politics of Heroin in Southeast Asia. New York: Harper and Row, 1972.

Shaplen, Robert. "Letter from Laos," The New Yorker. August 2, 1975. 64-72.

Toye, Hugh. Laos: Buffer State or Battleground. New York: Oxford University Press, 1968.

U.S. Army Pacific. The Enemy Logistics Systems in South Laos and East Cambodia(U). Hawaii, October 24, 1973. SECRET.

U.S. Central Intelligence Agency. Studies in Intelligence. Vol. 17, No. 1, Spring 1973. Washington. SECRET NO FOREIGN DISSEM.

_____. Studies in Intelligence. Vol. 17, No. 3, Fall 1973. Washington. SECRET NO FOREIGN DISSEM.

U.S. Defense Attache Office. Vientiane. Lao Intelligence and Security Services, 1955-1973(U). Intelligence Report 6 856 0365 73. Vientiane, December 1973. SECRET.

_____. The Last Six Months of the 1972-1973 Plaine Des Jarres Campaign(U). Intelligence Report 6 856 0015 74. Vientiane, 1974. SECRET.

_____. The NVA 1972-1973 Bolovens Campaign(U). Intelligence Report 6 856 0016 74. Vientiane, 1974. SECRET.

UNCLASSIFIED

UNCLASSIFIED

SECRET

81

. NVA Participation in the War for North Laos: 1955-1973(U).
Intelligence Report 6 856 0018 74. Vientiane, 1974. SECRET.

. NVA Participation in the War for South Laos: 1962-1973(U).
Intelligence Report 6 856 0017 74. Vientiane, 1974. SECRET.

. The 29th NVA Regiment and the February 1973 Battle for Muang
Phalane, MR III(U). Intelligence Report 6 856 0046 74. Vientiane,
1974. SECRET.

Zasloff, Joseph J. The Pathet Lao: Leadership and Organization.
Lexington, Mass.: D. C. Heath and Co., 1973.

, and Alan E. Goodman (eds.). Indochina in Conflict: A Political
Assessment. Lexington, Mass.: D. C. Heath and Co., 1972.

SECRET

UNCLASSIFIED

(This page is unclassified)